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### ABBREVIATIONS

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Author’s translation</td>
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<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td><em>New International Version</em> of the Bible</td>
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<td>NRSV</td>
<td><em>New Revised Standard Version</em> of the Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>TNIV</td>
<td><em>Today’s New International Version</em> of the New Testament</td>
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ABSTRACT

The following thesis represents an effort to meaningfully interact with open theism’s interpretation of Scripture. Since publication of *The Openness of God* in 1994, the open view has generated enormous controversy among evangelicals. Most of the controversy has focused on open theism’s denial of God’s exhaustive knowledge or control of the future. One of open theism’s major contentions is that it stands in greater harmony with the whole of Scripture than perhaps more “conventional” understandings of God do.

To date, none of the responses to open theism of which I am aware have formulated a viable affirmation of a fully sovereign God from the metanarrative of Scripture. The purpose of this thesis is to fill this gap in the literature by responding to open theism’s challenge to consider the whole teaching of Scripture and not merely those passages that appear to support a conventional view of God. I will divide the biblical narrative into three major themes—Creation, Fall and Redemption—and evaluate what each has to contribute to a biblical view of God’s sovereignty. It is my opinion that the revealed history of God’s activity—that is, the biblical metanarrative—can support the affirmation of a fully sovereign God.
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

For some time now, theological inquiry into the nature of God has tended to emphasize the divine qualities of transcendence: *immutability, impassibility, omniscience, omnipotence*. God has often been described as the “unmoved mover” and the “uncaused cause.”

In recent years, a number of scholars have begun to question this “conventional” understanding of God, suggesting that it presents a one-sided view of the divine nature. Lost in the picture, they say, are God’s relational—or *immanent*—qualities, like openness and responsive love. The emerging perspective, commonly known as open theism, has presented a serious challenge to core theological assumptions long held by many evangelicals. The ensuing debate has focused primarily on determining what constitutes a proper understanding of God as he is revealed in Scripture.

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1 “Conventional” was a term suggested to me in a personal correspondence from Dr. Clark Pinnock, dated September 19, 2001.

2 Because open theism has emerged primarily in recent years, the number of works that present a comprehensive introduction to its major tenets is somewhat limited. Presently the most significant works are as follows. David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996). Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2000). Terrence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994). Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001). John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downer’s Grove, InterVarsity Press, 1998). Basinger primarily concerns himself with demonstrating the logical/philosophical validity of what he calls “basic freewill theism.” Boyd presents a detailed contrast of conventional theism and open theism, arguing that the motifs of a partially closed future and a partially open future are equally important to Christian faith. Fretheim’s work predates the conscious emergence of open theism as a popular theology among evangelicals, so he does not always use the same vocabulary of later authors. Still, his writing is foundational to open theism’s interpretation of Scripture, as demonstrated by the reliance of later proponents upon his work. *The Openness of God* gives the first (and perhaps the most comprehensive) presentation of open theism, discussing its major tenets from biblical, historical, theological, and philosophical perspectives. Pinnock’s *Most Moved Mover* is the most recent work published in defense of open theism. It is essentially a restatement of major premises, but by virtue of its newness it is able to take into consideration some of the more recent challenges to emerge in the wake of *The Openness of God*. Sanders divides his work, *The God Who Risks*, into two main sections. In the first, he moves through the major narratives of Scripture, offering an open theist’s interpretation of them. In the second, he presents a brief philosophical argument for open theism.
Unfortunately, the response of conventional theists attempting to refute open theism has been marked in large measure by impassioned acrimony rather than reasoned debate.\(^3\) Under such circumstances the risk of misrepresenting what open theists actually believe is significant. Thus, in laying a foundation for the present undertaking, I consider it essential to offer a balanced introduction to open theism’s basic theological assertions.

I. Open Theism Summarized

What follows is but one possible means of organizing open theism’s core tenets in somewhat systematic fashion. While not every open theist would arrange their theology in the same manner, most would be in general agreement with the statements made below.\(^4\)

Many open theists begin with a discussion of metaphor as it relates to God. Metaphors are employed heavily in Scripture to describe the character of God—that is, his attributes. Open theists assert that some metaphors, referred to as “controlling” or “root” metaphors, are more important than others; these they say come closer to expressing the

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\(^3\) Many critics of open theism hurt their own cause by (a) using inflammatory (and sometimes inaccurate) language and (b) by attempting to squelch legitimate debate. A few examples will suffice. (1) Royce Gordon Gruenler inaccurately described open theism as process theism masquerading in evangelical garb. See Wendy Murray Zoba, “God at Risk,” Christianity Today, March 5, 2001. While there are similarities, the two theologies are different in that open theism affirms creatio ex nihilo, God’s ontological independence from the world, his personhood, the trinity, the incarnation, etc. (2) In his endorsement of God’s Lesser Glory, John Piper writes that open theism “dishonors God, distorts Scripture, damages faith, and would… destroy churches and lives.” While the present writer shares several of Piper’s theological and interpretive objections to open theism, such incendiary rhetoric has no place in academic discussion—particularly one that is taking place among Christians and in full view of a watchful world. (3) In the text of God’s Lesser Glory, Bruce Ware casts aspersion on InterVarsity Press, Baker Book House and Christianity Today for providing open theists a platform from which to articulate their views. See Ware, God’s Lesser Glory, 24-25, including footnotes 13 and 14. (4) In November 2001, members of the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) passed a resolution (253–66–41) affirming God’s complete foreknowledge of all things past, present and future. Two of its leading proponents—Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem—made no secret of their intent to rid ETS of any members who might affirm open theism. Other respected scholars including Dr. Darrell Bock (Dallas Theological Seminary) and Dr. Alan Johnson (Wheaton College)—though they agreed in principle with the resolution—expressed concern over efforts to squelch debate within a professional, academic society. See David Neff, “Foreknowledge Debate Clouded by ‘Political Agenda,’ ” Christianity Today, November 19, 2001. See also Darrell Bock’s presidential address in the Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society, April 2002. Not only are the tactics described here unbecoming of Christians, they potentially create the impression that the side employing them is attempting to compensate for an inability to adequately defend its position.

\(^4\) Drs. Clark Pinnock and John Sanders graciously agreed to review my summary of open theism. Both indicated that the material presented in this introductory section accurately reflects the general principles of open theism. Where specific clarifications were offered, they were incorporated into the present version.
“divine reality.” Love, for the open theist, is the root metaphor; or, as Richard Rice puts it, “Love is what it means to be God.”

The implications for love as the root metaphor are many, but two are of chief significance. First, love has implications for God’s interaction with human beings. A loving God is a responsive God. If God loves us, his interaction with us must be genuine; and genuine interaction requires the bestowal of real freedom upon love’s object. For such human freedom to exist, God cannot be said to unilaterally determine the course of history. This ought not be construed as a denial of God’s ability to govern history; instead, his is an act of divine self-limitation—one motivated by love. In other words, God, by choice, opens himself to the influence of human beings. He can be prevailed upon through petitionary prayer to change his plans. And his plans can be thwarted by the contrary actions of human individuals. In some cases, events—particularly negative ones—simply happen apart from any set plan of God’s design.

Second, such openness on God’s part implies that the future is partially open. To the extent that God has not conclusively decreed something to happen, the future is uncertain—for humanity and perhaps for God, too. If the future is truly open, God cannot know it with

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6 Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” 19. The idea of love as a metaphor for God is derived from 1 John 4:8 (“God is love.”). Rice comments, “The statement God is love is as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of the divine reality.” (p. 18) Here and elsewhere, open theism argues for a hierarchy in the attributes of God (see also 21).


10 Conversely, some open theists argue that the extent to which God has decreed something to happen, the future is partially settled. (See Boyd, God of the Possible, 31.) I use the phrase “conclusively decreed” because, in the open theist model, even a sovereign decree from God does not necessarily settle the future with certainty. As will be seen, one motif of the open view of God is that he is free to change his mind. Thus, when he declares his intent to do something, there is no ironclad guarantee that he will not change his mind, unless such a change would constitute a violation of his moral character. (All open theists stress that God, while not immutable in the Reformed sense, is completely reliable in the ethical sense.)
absolute certainty; thus future knowledge does not necessarily fall within the boundaries of God’s omniscience.

Open theists do not suggest, however, that God’s competence is lacking in any way. Having complete present knowledge and perfect memory of the past, God is able to act and react something like a master chess player. Frequently he can anticipate another player’s next move with great accuracy. His knowledge is such that it is far beyond the grasp of the human mind.

Such a God interacts with the world differently than the God of conventional theism would. He can express regret over the outcome of his own actions. He can indicate uncertainty as to what the future holds. A God without future knowledge may be surprised or even frustrated by the choices his creatures make. He may engage in genuine inquiry, wondering, for example, if his wayward people will ever return to him. He can make plans for the future—yet qualify them with real conditions; and he can ultimately change those plans should the need arise. In other words, God’s interactions with his creation are meaningful.

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11 Open theism tends to conflict with at least one form of Arminianism at this point. An Arminian would agree that not every event has its origin in the divine decree. However, many Arminians also teach God’s complete foreknowledge. Some open theists have argued convincingly that to the extent something is known with certainty, there exist no other real options. Thus if God foresees with certainty a particular outcome to a specific event, then there are no real alternative outcomes to the one that he foresaw. Genuine human freedom requires the existence of real alternatives to the path ultimately taken in any situation; therefore, divine foreknowledge is incompatible with human freedom. However, it should be noted that not all open theists view divine responsiveness and simple foreknowledge as necessarily contradictory. Basinger, while himself rejecting simple foreknowledge, argues that its logical defense is still plausible within a “basic freewill theism” construct.

12 It is important to note that open theists do not dispute the concept of omniscience (though they redefine it), but rather the conventional understanding of foreknowledge. Boyd, Pinnock, and Hasker argue that the omniscience equals God’s knowledge of everything there is to know. Since, by nature, the future does not yet exist, it cannot be known. In this sense they attempt to redefine the traditional understanding of omniscience. Sanders argues that God is not portrayed as having exhaustive foreknowledge and that simple foreknowledge is useless for providence anyway.

13 The Openness of God, 7, 42-43.

14 What follows in this paragraph is based on Gregory Boyd’s eight motifs of a partially open future. See God of the Possible, 55-75.
II. The Nature of the Problem

Such is the character and nature of God as viewed through the lens of open theism. Claims that “God comes to know events as they take place,” and that he “sometimes expresses uncertainty about [the future],” have provoked fierce rebuttals from conventional theists, replete with litanies of familiar passages attesting to the sovereign power of God. Yet none of the responses I have read thus far interact with what may be the most important argument put forth by open theism: Advocates of the open view contend that their position is more thoroughly biblical—that it takes into account the whole scriptural teaching concerning the nature of God. In The Case for Freewill Theism, David Basinger very nearly issues a challenge on this point to critics of the open view:

To challenge successfully the right of a Christian with a high view of Scripture to affirm [the open view of God], what critics must argue is that it is impossible…to deny that that Scripture as a whole portrays God as one who possesses [exhaustive] knowledge. I do not believe…that any such argument has yet been produced. (Nor do I believe that such an argument will or ever can be produced.”

Not surprising, in light of their appeal to the Bible “as a whole,” open theists have a high view of Scripture; and many among their ranks have shown an affinity for the narrative study of Scripture. For John Sanders in particular, God’s nature is revealed primarily through his acts in history, making the narrative a natural starting point for answering the kind of questions open theists raise.

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15 “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,”

16 God of the Possible, 58.


18 See Basinger, 51-52; Boyd, 12-13; Fretheim, 23; Pinnock, 20; Rice, 15; and Sanders, 39-40.

19 Basinger, 52. Emphasis original.
III. The Nature of the Task

I believe that open theists are right to insist that our statements about God be in harmony with the whole of Scripture and not merely supported by isolated proof texts made to conform to one’s predetermined theological agenda. Furthermore, Sanders’ claim that God’s historical acts teach us about the divine nature is correct. The propositional statements of which many conventional theists are so fond (e.g., 1 Samuel 15:29, Isaiah 46:9-10) ought to be seen as being informed by the narrative—by the historical context in which they occur. They cannot be fully understood apart from the story of Scripture.

With this in mind, I have endeavored to answer the following question: Can the narrative of Scripture be interpreted to support a conventional understanding of God’s sovereignty? Put another way, what kind of God do we see in the biblical narrative? What is the nature and extent of his sovereignty?

Given the limits of the present undertaking, an adequately comprehensive survey of the biblical narrative is impossible. Therefore, with broad strokes I hope to address the following major narrative themes in Scripture:

- Creation (chapter two)
- Fall (chapter three)
- Redemption in the Old Testament (chapter four)
  - Noah, Abraham, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, Moses and the exodus, the covenant, Saul and David
- Redemption in the New Testament (chapter four)
  - Jesus’ birth, Jesus’ calling of the disciples, Jesus’ healing ministry, Judas’ betrayal of Jesus, Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial, Jesus’ mission

Because John Sanders’ The God Who Risks gives perhaps the most thorough, narrative-oriented defense of the open view, I will primarily interact with his contribution to the study of providence. Clark Pinnock’s Most Moved Mover will also be referred to

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20 See Most Moved Mover, 20.

21 Though I wish to add that God’s spoken word—his self-disclosure—is another crucial means by which his nature is revealed to us. The two are really inseparable since it is via his word that we learn about his acts.
regularly because it is the most recent book-length contribution in support of open theism (as of my writing this introduction).

In the interest of full disclosure, it is necessary for me to identify my areas of agreement with both open theism and conventional theism. With respect to the following, I am in agreement with open theists:

- The denial of foreknowledge as kind of simple future knowledge (i.e., one possible Arminian view of foreknowledge whereby God “looks” into the future without actually determining what will happen).
- The general incompatibility of libertarian human freedom with the idea of an exhaustively sovereign God who knows the future absolutely.  

On the following points, I tend to concur with classical Reformed theology:

- The rejection of libertarian human freedom as a biblical concept (regarding it to be largely a product of Enlightenment rationalism).  
- The affirmation of an exhaustively sovereign God who acts as the author of all human history.

As noted above, I have not found among the many responses to the open view one that takes up open theism’s challenge to interact with the biblical narrative as a whole. The purpose of the present work is to fill this hole in the literature and perhaps to attempt an answer to the question: Can a narrative approach to Scripture support the conventional understanding of God?

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22 Though I acknowledge that perhaps the best possible answer to this problem is to accept a certain level of paradox in one’s theology.

23 While I do not deny the reality of human freedom altogether, I believe our understanding of what such freedom entails might require some rethinking.
CHAPTER TWO
CREATION AND THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

Open theism appreciates the significance of creation to the doctrine of providence. John Sanders writes, “The doctrine of creation sets the stage for the doctrine of providence.”24 Indeed, it hardly seems possible to overstate the importance of creation as the foundation for our understanding of God. The creation narrative introduces us to the God who acts throughout the rest of the biblical drama. Genesis 1 and 2 are God’s first self-disclosure; in these two chapters we see perhaps his two most important characteristics25—his transcendence and his immanence—functioning in harmony.

IV. Open Theism and the Creation Narrative

For open theism, the creation narrative expresses both God’s sovereignty and his self-limitation. An open view of creation entails the following points. First, open theism affirms the historic doctrine of creatio ex nihilo. Advocates of the open view distinguish themselves from process theists by affirming that all things but God have a beginning. Creation itself was a free act: Nothing necessitated or compelled God’s decision to create. Calling the universe into existence was an act of grace.26

Second, open theists—specifically John Sanders and Clark Pinnock—argue that creation involved God’s mastery over primordial forces of chaos.27 Sanders is sympathetic to

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26 Sanders, The God Who Risks, 41.

27 See Sanders, The God Who Risks, 41-42. Sanders writes, “I affirm creatio ex nihilo.” Immediately preceding this affirmation, Sanders states, “Both of these ideas [God as Creator of all that exists and God as
Jon Levenson’s argument that prior to the Fall there existed hostile powers which “pose[d] a threat to Yahweh’s sovereign will.” Pinnock, who makes a careful distinction between primordial chaos and those parts of the cosmos that are attributable to God’s handiwork, describes the pre-Fall world as follows:

It is...a world in jeopardy with forces at work that resist God and a power of chaos that hinders the blessing of God. The acts of creation as recorded in Genesis chapter 1 brought chaos under control and reintroduced God’s order, but they did not eliminate the threat of this mysterious ‘formless void’ factor (v.2).

At any rate, divine “vigilance” is needed to stay the hand of chaos, which represents a legitimate threat perhaps capable of undermining God’s creative activity. Thus, while God may not be absolutely sovereign in the conventional sense, he is able to exercise “‘mastery’ over his opponents.”

Third, the act of creation involved divine self-limitation: To create the world as he did meant that God had to forgo other options. With every detail of creation, additional possibilities are forfeited; with every decision made God voluntarily gave up some degree of divine freedom. For example, by endowing human beings with a “relative and derived autonomy,” God willfully relinquished some control of his creation. At this point in the drama, nothing forces God’s hand; he limits his options because he wants to. However, as the drama unfolds, God as described by open theism appears to experience externally imposed limitations as well—as is arguably the case every time God must change course because human beings have successfully thwarted his purposes (e.g., Genesis 3; 6, etc.).

victor over chaos] have important insights for the study of providence.” What follows seems to be an effort at synthesizing elements of creatio ex nihilo and creatio contra nihilum. See also Clark H. Pinnock, Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Providence (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 36. Pinnock seems perhaps more comfortable with creatio contra nihilum.


29 Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 36.

30 Sanders, The God Who Risks, 42.


32 For open theism, human freedom and meticulous sovereignty are incompatible; therefore one of the two must be rejected. See Sanders, The God Who Risks, 16-19 (especially 17).
Fourth, open theism describes both initial and ongoing creation as a partnership between God and the created order, with God being the initiating partner in the relationship. Clark Pinnock argues that the initial act of creation “does not entail that God controls and determines everything.” Clark Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 109. Rather, in creation God endows his creatures with “a relative and derived autonomy” so they can experience cooperative, loving relationships with him. In a similar vein, commentator Terrence Fretheim questions the idea of God’s initial creation as “a sovereign unilateral divine act.” Terrence Fretheim, The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 73. Rather, God entrusts some responsibility for creation to that which he has created. For example, in Genesis 1:11, God commands the land to produce the very first vegetation that covered the earth. On this basis Fretheim concludes, “The creative powers are shared.” Fretheim, The Suffering of God, 73-74. Likewise God shares power in the ongoing work of creation. By commanding Adam and Eve to “be fruitful and multiply,” God transferred a significant amount of creative power to his creatures. (Open theism generally assumes any divine transfer of power necessarily reduces God’s own power.) At the same time, God remains connected to the ongoing process of creation, as indicated by texts such as Psalm 139:13-16 and Job 10:8-12. In any case, the sharing of power introduces an element of indeterminacy to creation’s future. Fretheim writes, “If the creative powers of the earth are affected adversely…God’s possibilities for the earth are thereby affected, and indeed limited.” Fretheim, The Suffering of God, 73-74. While it is not uncommon to say that God entrusts to the created order some responsibility for the ongoing work of creation (e.g., the procreative blessing to Adam and Eve in Genesis 1:28), the suggestion that God shares with it some measure of responsibility for the initial act of creation is perhaps a unique contribution of open theism.

Fifth, open theism draws heavily upon the creation of humanity in God’s image. When humanity’s creation is announced in Genesis 1, God speaks with the language of divine consultation, according to Fretheim and Sanders. It is not the speech of an absolute

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36 See, for example, Sanders, The God Who Risks, 44. See also Fretheim, The Suffering of God, 73-74.
monarch. Instead, the language of creation implies a clear relationality within the triune godhead. Sanders notes that, “Humans are fashioned after the image of this dialogical God who enters into genuine reciprocal relations with his creatures.”

In summary, open theism interprets the creation narrative to describe a God who does not need to control everything in order to feel secure in his divinity. The God of Genesis 1–2 freely shares power with his creatures and gives them the freedom to do what they will with that power. While genuine risk is inherent to God’s plan, there is no indication within the narrative that his creatures will turn against him and cause the whole project to come unraveled.

Conventional theists should find a good deal of common ground with open theists in their description of creation. At the same time, I believe the text of Genesis 1–2 acccents God’s sovereignty more than open theism has suggested. I argue below that Scripture’s first narrative introduces God as one who commands the created order and orchestrates history toward an unfailing, divine purpose.

V. Background of the Creation Narrative

The creation narrative must be understood within its historical and theological context. Its relationship to the religious pantheon of its day and its contribution to Scripture are essential to a proper interpretation. As John Sanders observes, the narrative is not concerned so much with the mechanics of creation as it is with the God of creation. I believe the text introduces the God of the Old Testament as Lord of the entire cosmos. It sets him in contrast to all the other gods of the day, and his deeds in contrast to those recorded in the other creation myths of the ancient world. The importance of these features—surveyed briefly here—will be referred to later as we address the theological significance of narrative itself.

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40 Ibid., 46.

41 Ibid., 43.
A. Relationship to the Pentateuch

The creation narrative lays the theological groundwork for the rest of the Pentateuch. Moses, its most likely author (at least as far as the basic content is concerned), gave Israel the foundation of its faith at a crucial time in its history, just prior to its conquest of the Promised Land. Moses portrays God as both Creator and Redeemer. The God who creates all things is the same God who delivers his people and establishes his covenant with them (cf. Genesis 14:19-20; Deuteronomy 32:6, 10-14). The God of the Pentateuch chooses unremarkable individuals through whom he accomplishes his redemptive plan—a plan that advances in spite of—even through—the moral failures of his chosen people (see Genesis 27–33; 37–50, especially 50:20). The Pentateuch seems to understand Israel’s covenant God as the absolutely sovereign Creator who also stands behind every event of redemptive history.

B. You Shall Have No Other Gods: Creation Narrative as Theological Polemic

Commentators frequently describe the creation narrative as a polemic against ancient Near Eastern cosmology. In the biblical myth, God called all things into being, bringing life itself into existence. By contrast, the pagan gods of the Fertile Crescent were thought to “create” by giving new form to preexisting matter. They merely activated life, having no power to call into being life that did not already exist.

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42 Most evangelicals assume Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch. While critical scholars have long challenged this assumption—one that lies beyond the scope of this paper—it is the present writer’s opinion that Moses provided at least the basic content represented in the books of the Pentateuch.

43 Genesis 27–33 is the story of Jacob, who inherited the promised blessing through duplicitous means. Yet Paul reiterates Malachi’s assertion that God chose Jacob instead of Esau (see Ro 9:10-15; cf. Mal 1:2-3).


Moreover, the Genesis narrative denies the very possibility that such gods exist at all. The narrator openly blasphemes the gods of other nations, asserting that they are mere creatures themselves.⁴⁶ God’s supremacy and power over creation are uncontested.

C. Two Stories, One God: Genesis 1:1–2:3 and 2:4-25

The creation story is actually two narratives woven together to provide a fuller account than a single story could offer. The first narrative (Ge 1:1–2:3) provides an impressive description of God’s uncontested mastery over nature: He speaks and creation obeys. Throughout the first section, God is referred to as "elōhîm—the all-powerful creator who reveals himself through his mighty deeds. The second narrative introduces another element of the divine character, suggested by its use of God’s covenant name YHWH. As in the first narrative, God orchestrates the grand drama of creation according to his perfect will; but his purposes are more clearly revealed in the second narrative. Genesis 2:4-25 focuses specifically on the origin of humanity. The cosmos, it is revealed, has been custom made for God’s most important creation.⁴⁷

Open theism charges that conventional theology neglects God’s relational character in favor of his transcendence. Indeed these two elements of God’s nature stand in tension within historic Christian theology. However, the creation narrative of Genesis 1–2 affirms that God is both absolutely sovereign and thoroughly personal in his relationship to the cosmos. If the two creation stories are properly interpreted as a single unit, then God’s superintendence of history need not be denied in order to affirm his relational character.

VI. The Sovereignty of God in Creation

God himself is the subject of the narrative; he is both the primary actor and the one who orchestrates the events of creation.⁴⁸ The narrative describes God not in terms of

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⁴⁶ Wenham, Genesis 1–15, p. xlix. Mathews, Genesis 1–11:26, 150–151. Mathews notes that the Sumerians, for example, gave special emphasis to the worship of heavenly bodies. Among their pantheon of gods were Anu (the sky god) and Enlil (the atmosphere god). By contrast, Genesis 1:6–7 and 14–19 assert that God created the sky and the celestial bodies.

abstract philosophical concepts but in terms of his activity. The ultimate question asked is not “Does God exist?” but “What kind of God exists?”

Whereas open theism believes Genesis 1–2 describes a God who does not exercise exhaustive sovereignty in creation or in general, I believe that such a reading lacks compelling support from the immediate context. Contrary to what Clark Pinnock has suggested, there seem to be numerous indicators in the narrative that God “controls and determines everything.” Based on several key themes drawn from the text and discussed below, I believe it is plausible to suggest that God is fully sovereign over the details of his creation.

A. "lōhîm: the Sovereign, Transcendent Creator

God’s act of creation reveals him to be "lōhîm—God above all things. As already noted, the term used for God throughout the first creation narrative is "lōhîm, a name that signifies God’s transcendence and sovereignty. Interestingly, as a reference to God "lōhîm occurs in the plural form, perhaps as an intensification of the singular meant to emphasize God’s primacy. Elsewhere in Scripture, "lōhîm appears in passages highlighting God’s superiority to both the created order and to the false gods worshipped throughout the pagan nations (see Exodus 15:11, 2 Samuel 7:22 and Isaiah 46:9).

B. Author of Time and History

God’s act of creation inaugurates time and history. The narrative begins with the famous words, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1, NIV). Evangelicals generally take these words to signify an absolute starting point before which nothing existed; thus laying a preliminary foundation for the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo (cf. Proverbs 8:22–27). In this context, the Hebrew b‘rē’sît (“beginning”) appears to signify not merely a beginning but the beginning. According to Westermann, this opening statement is

48 See Mathews, Genesis 1–11:26, 113.
50 Ibid., 273-282.
51 Some have challenged the traditional interpretation of b‘rē’sît because it is not accompanied by the Hebrew article in Genesis 1:1. In response, Sailhamer notes that b‘re’sît occurs in the absolute state without the
of “monumental importance” because it sets Genesis against all other creation myths.\textsuperscript{52} Genesis 1 is indeed unique among creation myths because of its assertion that nothing existed prior to God’s creative activity.

Already in the creation narrative we can sense boundaries being set around what follows. John Sailhamer notes, “The term ‘beginning’…in biblical Hebrew marks a starting point of a specific duration.”\textsuperscript{53} Throughout the Old Testament, “beginning” is closely associated with its antonym, “end” (‘ah\textsuperscript{r}ît, see Deuteronomy 11:12, Job 8:7, Ecclesiastes 7:8, Isaiah 46:10). Sailhamer explains the significance of this association: “By commencing this history with a ‘beginning’ (rē’sît)…the author has not only commenced a history of God and his people, he has also prepared the way for the consummation of that history at the at “the end of time” (‘ah\textsuperscript{r}ît).”\textsuperscript{54}

Thus it seems difficult to read the first sentence of Scripture without being confronted with the possibility that God superintends history. That history, commenced in Genesis 1, appears to be moving toward something—toward an eschatological consummation anticipated by the author with the phrase, “in the beginning.”\textsuperscript{55}

**C. Creator of all**

*God’s act of creation is both unique to himself and all encompassing in nature; no independently existing forces oppose God’s work.* The ability to create—to call into being that which is not—rests with God alone. Nowhere in Scripture is the verb bara’ (Heb., “to

\textsuperscript{52} Westermann, 97.

\textsuperscript{53} Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 20.

\textsuperscript{54} *Ibid.* See also 22 for additional information related to this interpretation. Kenneth Mathews takes the same interpretation, noting that Genesis 1:1 “anticipates the ‘end’…of human history” (Mathews, 126).

\textsuperscript{55} This is not to suggest that the creation narrative explicitly anticipates the form this consummation will take, since the connotations of the bērē’sît…‘ah\textsuperscript{r}ît pair are not necessarily specific. Indeed, to argue that creation anticipates redemption specifically (i.e., that we could predict the Fall and subsequent redemption from the creation narrative alone) makes it almost inevitable to conclude that the Fall was necessary (since the Fall was the impetus for God’s redemptive program). It is one thing to argue that Creation, Fall and Redemption were ordained beforehand in the sovereign plan of God; it is entirely another to suggest it was logically impossible for creation not to fall. Cf. Warren Austin Gage, *The Gospel of Genesis: Studies in Protology and Eschatology* (Winona Lake: Carpenter Books, 1984). Also Gerhard Von Rad, “The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation” in *Creation in the Old Testament*, (ed. Bernhard W. Anderson; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).
create”) used of anyone but God. Moreover, that all things owe their existence to God is suggested by the narrator’s use of the all-encompassing phrase “the heavens and the earth.” Genesis 1 uses this phrase to indicate totality in the same way we might say, “from A to Z.”

The assertion that all things have their origin in God finds affirmation within the literature of open theism. At the same time, some open theists have suggested that from the beginning creation was threatened by the hostile forces of primordial chaos that actively opposed God’s work. For example, while noting his affirmation of creatio ex nihilo (creation out of nothing), John Sanders appears to find creatio contra nihilo (creation versus nothing) equally plausible, noting that, “The emphasis of the creation story is not on God’s absolute sovereignty but on God’s ‘mastery’ over his opponents.” Pinnock is more direct in his support for creatio contra nihilo.

Creatio contra nihilo and the existence of primordial chaos are inferred from Genesis 1:2: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (emphasis added). “Formless and empty” (Heb., tohû wabohû), “darkness” and “the deep” are thought by some to euphemistically refer to sinister forces of chaos that oppose God’s creative activity. Such a view of Genesis 1:2 is at least partially influenced by the pagan religions of the ancient Near East and by the Greek concept of chaos.

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59 Particularly John Sanders and Clark Pinnock.

60 Sanders, The God Who Risks, 41-42.

61 Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 36.

62 See, for example, Westermann, Genesis 1–11, p. 105. While Westermann sees no particular sign of “personification or mythical allusion” in tohû wabohû, he writes that darkness “is not to be understood as a phenomenon of nature but rather as something sinister…the darkness of chaos…everywhere opposed to creation where the creator is the god of light or the sun god.”

Appealing to the existence of primordial chaos as a proof of limited providence is problematic. One must wonder about the origin of such forces, particularly in light of creatio ex nihilo. Process theists find no difficulty here since, unlike open theists, they do not affirm creatio ex nihilo. Primordial chaos may be accounted for within the context of creatio ex nihilo, but I believe that some of the efforts to do so are flawed.

There are at least three plausible explanations for the existence of primordial chaos. First, one might suggest that chaos is an independently existing force that actively opposes any attempt to bring order to creation. Such a view was a common feature of ancient Near Eastern cosmology. Pagan creation myths generally described the origins of the world in terms of a cosmic conflict that resulted in the subjugation of this preexisting chaos. As noted earlier, the gods did not create new life; they merely activated it by giving new form to chaotic matter. However, such a view is in conflict with the biblical account of creation, which attributes the existence of all things to God. Since Genesis 1 reads like a polemic against ancient Near Eastern paganism, one should not be surprised to note this tension between the pagan and biblical creation myths.

Second, we might say that primordial chaos was originally something good—a part of God’s initial creation that went bad somewhere between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. Clark Pinnock takes this approach when musing on the origins of primordial chaos. Though he admits that its origins are “mysterious,” Pinnock offers the following hypothesis:

I suppose that it stems from the fact that God delegated sovereignty to creatures, in this case the angels, and it has led to open warfare. The angels left their first estate before the appearance of humankind (Jude 6). This means that God is not now in complete control of the world and that genuine evil, which God does not want, exists. It means that things happen which God has not willed and that God’s plans at this point in history are not always fulfilled.

Pinnock’s explanation is not without difficulty; there seems to be scant biblical support for his conjecture on the origins of hostile chaos. Jude 6—the only passage of Scripture to which Pinnock explicitly refers—says nothing about the timing of the heavenly

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64 Mathews, Genesis 1–11, p. 119.

65 Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 36. John Sanders is silent with respect to the origins of primordial chaos.

66 Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 36.
rebellion, only that some angels rebelled against God. Even if Satan’s fall (see Isaiah 14:12) preceded God’s creation of the cosmos, it is perhaps too speculative to assume that Satan and his legions invaded God’s creation prior to the serpent’s entrance in the narrative. The text itself gives no clear indication of this. Creation is not specifically said to experience the ravages of sin until humanity’s own rebellion in Genesis 3.

There is a third plausible explanation for Scripture’s shadowy reference to primordial chaos. Whatever Genesis 1:2 meant by terms like “formless and empty,” “darkness” and “the deep,” the existence of such things is attributed to the hand of God himself. Such a view is consistent with the context of Genesis 1, if we take the phrase “the heavens the earth” as an idiomatic reference to the all-encompassing nature of God’s work. That God could be responsible for the creation of such things should not surprise us, since this appears to find affirmation elsewhere in Scripture (cf. Isaiah 45:7). Furthermore, as a polemic against pagan creation myths, the biblical account deliberately affirms God’s creation of things that were regarded by many in the ancient Near East as independently existing or even divine. Sun, moon and stars (1:14-19), creatures of the earth and sea (1:20-25)—all infused with divinity in the Near East—belong to the created order fashioned by God’s own hand.67

It is possible that primordial chaos is not meant to signify a particularly sinister force that opposes God’s creative agenda. The intent of Genesis 1:2 may be simply to picture creation in an unfinished (but not necessarily hostile) state. The development of the narrative in chapter 1 lends some credibility to such an interpretation. The phrase “formless and empty” (Heb., tohû wabohû) is used to describe the condition of the land before it is ultimately declared “good.”68 The remainder of the first creation narrative follows a twofold structure:

- **Forming that which is “formless” (1:3-13)**
- **Filling up that which is “empty.” (1:14-31)69**

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With this twofold structure God moves powerfully toward the accomplishment of his divine objective: creating a suitable habitat for human beings. The creation of humanity marks the dramatic peak of the narrative. In this context the phrase “formless and empty” means that the land is presently unsuitable for human habitation. The progression of the narrative reveals that God creates with clear purpose: Land exists to be inhabited by human beings (cf. Isaiah 45:18). Apart from this condition it fails to realize its created intent. At this point in the creation narrative (Genesis 1:2), however, creation is not yet what God intends it to be. Nevertheless, God’s spirit hovers over the unformed deep, indicating that he has neither given up nor finished his work of creation. In John Sailhamer’s words, this is creation in its “not yet” state.70

However, the narrator’s purpose in Genesis 1:2 is not necessarily to suggest that God’s sovereign plan for creation is being threatened by an outside force. The land is not “formless and empty” because God has encountered unexpected opposition to his creative work; rather, creation exists in a temporarily unfulfilled state simply because God has not yet brought it into fulfillment (at least as of Genesis 1:2). God’s own timetable may be the best explanation for the present state of affairs. The moment God sets about forming and filling the cosmos (1:3ff), creation obeys without any indication of resistance.

The progressive movement of creation should not come as a surprise to the careful reader of Scripture. Throughout the Bible, God generally reveals himself in such fashion. Both his moral and sovereign will are disclosed progressively, but this does not necessarily suggest that his purposes can be thwarted. The “not yet” construct is a key paradigm throughout redemptive history. Israel endures 400 years in bondage because the land is not yet ready for conquest; the time is not yet right because the sins of its pagan inhabitants have not yet reached their “full measure” (Genesis 15:16). Likewise, Jesus’ incarnation inaugurates God’s kingdom (Matthew 10:7, 16:28; Mark 1:15), but salvation is not yet complete because creation still awaits the final restoration (Romans 8:18-25).

70 Sailhamer, Genesis, p. 24.
God’s act of creation—whereby he makes habitable what was once uninhabitable—is a type of what is to come redemptive history unfolds.\textsuperscript{71}

Whether one takes Genesis 1:2 as a reference to primordial chaos or something less, the message of creation is the same: God is the creator of all things. As such, he is sovereign over all that his hands form.

**D. The Irresistible Power of God’s Word**

God’s act of creation occurs by simple command; his spoken word is sufficient to ensure the accomplishment of his sovereign will. The efficacy of God’s spoken word is one of the most important themes of the narrative; the phrase “and God said” occurs no fewer than nine times (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29). In each case, God issues a command, and creation responds with instantaneous obedience; things are as God declares them to be.\textsuperscript{72} Centuries later, the psalmist extolled the absolute sovereignty of God, harking back to the days of creation:

> By the word of the Lord the were heavens made,  
> and all their starry host by the breath of his mouth...  
> Let all the earth fear the LORD;  
> let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.  
> For he spoke, and it came to be;  
> he commanded, and it stood firm.  
> The LORD brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;  
> he frustrates the plans of the peoples.  
> The counsel of the LORD stands forever,  
> the thoughts of his heart to all generations.

—Psalm 33:6, 8-11 (emphasis added)

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., pp. 24-25.

\textsuperscript{72} Westermann, Genesis 1–11, 110. The “and God said” of Genesis 1:29 can be viewed as more of a blessing than a command in the strict sense. However, even here creation functions as God intended (though the Fall introduces some notable changes).
In creation, God appears to be absolutely sovereign; he “has only to speak, and all things [come] into being” exactly as he wants them to be. The author of Psalm 33 seems to have applied this lesson from creation to his overall understanding of God—that is, just as God is absolutely sovereign in creation, he is likewise sovereign in the affairs of nations and in all of history.

E. Power to Name

God’s act of creation confirms his dominion over all that he makes. Throughout the narrative, God names various elements of his creation (Genesis 1:5, 8, 10). In the ancient Near East, the ability to name something indicated power and dominion over that which was named. Westermann saw an even greater significance in the ability to name, suggesting that in the context of creation, the act of naming gave an object its destiny.

Of interest to the present discussion is not just that God named, but what he named. God names light—a positive symbol in the ancient Near East, but he also names the darkness, often associated with a more sinister realm. Genesis 1 reveals that both reside under the sovereign care of God. Moreover, God names the skies, proclaiming his dominion over a realm commonly thought to be the domain of the Sumerian gods Anu

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73 Youngblood, The Book of Genesis, 27.

74 Note in 2 Kings 23:24, Pharaoh Neco establishes Eliakim as the puppet king of Judah, changing his name to Jehoiakim. History repeats itself in 24:17 when Nebuchadnezzar makes Mattaniah king of Judah, changing his name to Zedekiah. In both cases, the foreign king changed the name of the man hand-picked for the throne to remind Judah who was really in control.

75 Westermann, Genesis 1–11, 114-115.

76 God entrusted the naming of the animals to Adam (Genesis 2:19-20).

77 Westermann, Genesis 1–11, 105.
and Enlil.\textsuperscript{78} He even names the sea, seen in creation as an “obstacle” (though not necessarily in the sense of conscious opposition to God’s creative agenda) to humanity’s habitation of the land and later in the metanarrative as an instrument of judgment (Genesis 6–8, Exodus 13:17–14:31).\textsuperscript{79} In naming elements on both ends of the spectrum of creation—light and darkness, land and sea—God makes known his dominion over all things and his power over their destiny.

\textbf{VII. The Sovereignty of God in the Creation of Humanity}

The creation narrative culminates with God’s creating humanity. So important is it that the author devotes a second narrative (2:4-25) to focus specifically on the origin of man and woman. The text reveals that all creation was done with humanity in mind. Human beings are not merely God’s crowning achievement in creation; they are the fulfillment of all God’s prior creative activity.

The creation of humankind is of great importance to theology—particularly to open theism. As noted earlier, Fretheim and Sanders make much of what they call the language of “divine consultation” (or “dialogical” language) used by God in Genesis 1:26 as he deliberates his next move.\textsuperscript{80}

Open theism also assumes that to create humanity as he did, God freely gave up some of his sovereign control over creation. One of open theism’s key presuppositions is that a meaningful relationship with God requires true (i.e., autonomous) freedom, which in turn requires that God relinquish some of his control (and therefore some of his knowledge) of the future. Thus, according to the open theist construct, divine transcendence and immanence are to some degree mutually exclusive. In order to have one (immanence) God must give up some amount of the other (transcendence).\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{78} Mathews, \textit{Genesis 1–11:26}, 150-151.

\textsuperscript{79} Sailhamer, \textit{Genesis}, 31.

\textsuperscript{80} See Fretheim, \textit{The Book of Genesis}, 335 and Sanders, \textit{The God Who Risks}, 46.

\textsuperscript{81} See especially Fretheim, \textit{The Suffering of God}, 73-74.
It is my contention that in describing the creation of humanity open theism overlooks some important themes in the narrative. Arguably there are multiple indicators of God’s meticulous sovereignty in the account of humanity’s origin.

**A. Divine Deliberation or Sovereign Proclamation (or Both)**

The language with which humanity’s creation is announced draws our attention to God’s sovereignty. Genesis 1:26 begins in typical fashion: “And God said” (cf. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24). (The efficacious, creative power of God’s spoken word is addressed above.) At the same time, the pronouncement that follows uses language found nowhere else in the creation narrative: God speaks using the first person phrase “let us,” as opposed to the less personal “let there be” used elsewhere (1:3, 6, 14). Fretheim’s concludes that this is the language of “divine consultation.” Historically, there have been at least three possible ways to read the language of Genesis 1:26:

- **It may be that Genesis 1:26 gives an early glimpse into God’s triune nature. In this case, then “let us” suggests a deliberation or consultation within the Godhead—one that results in his decision to create man and woman. Fretheim and Sanders appear to follow this interpretation. However, diverse deliberation in Scripture typically utilizes the singular pronoun, not a plural (cf. Genesis 18:17).**

- **Some have suggested that God is speaking to an angelic audience. However, this seems unlikely, since “us” would suggest the angels’ participation in creation. The rest of the narrative, however, affirms God’s sole authorship of creation.**

- **The divine plural may anticipate the plurality of humanity (male and female), “thus casting the human relationship between man and woman in the role of reflecting God’s own personal relationship with himself.”**

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82 Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 37.

83 For a discussion of the interpretive options, see Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 38; Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 145; Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 28 and Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, 160. Sailhamer sees the divine plural as anticipatory of the human plurality, male and female. By contrast, Westermann and Mathews tend to support the view of divine deliberation. Deliberation can simply refer to careful forethought as opposed to “consultation,” which for some connotes an uncertainty preceding the final announcement of what will be done.

84 Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 38.

It is not necessary to reject the possibility of deliberative speech in 1:26 in order to affirm God’s meticulous sovereignty over humanity’s creation; the two are not mutually exclusive. In the context of Scripture, the language of divine deliberation may have been employed as a device giving the human reader access to the sovereign counsel of God. In any case, it makes little sense to read 1:26 as deliberative speech if by this we mean to suggest that God is only now deciding what to do next. Earlier I suggested that the structure of Genesis 1 anticipates humanity’s creation as the seminal act of the narrative. God forms and fills with deliberate purpose—arguably, to make the earth a suitable habitat for human beings. So it seems from the progression of Genesis 1 that it was God’s intent all along to create humans. If this is the case, we need not suggest a limited view of God’s sovereignty on the basis of his deliberation in 1:26, since by means of that deliberation he made known what he planned to do from the beginning.

**B. Stamped With God’s Image**

The narrative is clear that humanity is a unique creation. While plants and animals are produced “according to their kinds” (1:24, NIV), humanity is made after God’s kind—that is, “in his own image” (1:27, NIV). Theologians have long debated the significance of *imagio dei*. Although a thorough discussion of this doctrine is not possible here, one key aspect of *imagio dei* deserves mention, in view of the openness debate.

Bearing God’s image manifests divine sovereignty: Human beings are marked as belonging to God in a special way, setting them apart among all creation. Ron Youngblood notes two ancient Near Eastern parallels to *imagio dei*:

- A coin stamped with the image of a ruler symbolized that ruler’s authority over the land.
- Ancient conquerors commonly set up statues or images of themselves to remind the populace of their sovereignty.
In the same way, human beings, bearing the divine image, are reminders of God’s dominion over creation.\textsuperscript{86} They are his representatives, much in the way that ancient Near Eastern rulers were thought to be the gods’ representatives to the city-states of Mesopotamia.\textsuperscript{87} As God’s representatives, man and woman rule the world on his behalf. The relationship pictured in Genesis 1 and 2—though it is eminently personal—is that of king and subject, suzerain and vassal. It is a covenant relationship.\textsuperscript{88} Note that the author begins using the name YHWH as he focuses specifically on the relationship between God and his human creation (Genesis 2:4-25). YHWH is God’s covenant name; it is the personal name by which God identifies himself when he establishes his covenant with Israel (Exodus 20:2). The Old Testament predominantly uses royal covenant language to describe God’s relationship to the people he has created—especially those whom he has set aside as part of his redemptive plan. This is a vital theme that open theism unfortunately overlooks.

C. Absolute Dependence

Genesis 1–2 shows humanity to be absolutely dependent on its Creator. God breathes life into the man he has formed (2:7); human existence relies entirely on the power of God. God not only provides the initial spark of human life; he also sustains the life he creates. Genesis 1 pictures God as the “beneficent Provider” who gives food for his creatures: “‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth and every tree with seed in its fruit.’ ” (1:29)\textsuperscript{89}

\textsuperscript{86} Youngblood, The Book of Genesis, 30.

\textsuperscript{87} Mathews, Genesis 1–11:26, 168-170.

\textsuperscript{88} Wenham, Genesis 1–15, 33. Already we see the threads of theological unity that hold the Pentateuch together.

\textsuperscript{89} Mathews, Genesis 1–11:26, 168-170.
Humans are also dependent upon God for their function and purpose. It is God who makes humankind responsible for stewarding the rest of creation. Adam’s power to name the animals is derived from God’s ability to do so (remembering that such ability implied power over that which was named). The delegation of this responsibility does not necessarily limit God’s sovereignty, as Fretheim and Sanders have suggested. There is nothing in the text to suggest that God—who has thus far superintended everything else in creation—cannot superintend Adam’s God-given function. Indeed, Adam would have no function apart from the enabling power of God.

God’s faithful provision of life, food and function is indicative of his deep, abiding love for humanity. On this open and conventional theists may gladly agree. However, it is precisely the fact that God’s love is power-laden that makes it something of significance.

**D. Male and Female From the Beginning**

The text leaves little doubt that the creation of humanity proceeded as God intended. One might be tempted to assume, in view of Genesis 1:18, that the creation of humanity involved an element of trial and error—that God had to modify his initial plan in order to improve Adam’s existence. However, even Sanders argues that God’s creation of humanity as male and female was part of the original plan.

Genesis 2:4–25 describes humanity’s creation in greater detail than the first narrative. Adam, we learn, was created first; and Eve was subsequently created to complete the human pair. That humanity is incomplete without both sexes is made clear by God’s statement, “It is not good,” in Genesis 1:18 (the only time these words occur in the creation narrative). However, the first narrative describes humanity’s creation more succinctly:

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So \text{ God created humankind in his image,}
\]
\[
in \text{ the image of God he created them;}
\]
\[
\text{male and female he created them.}
\]

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91 Sanders believes that God delayed the creation of woman until Adam had sufficient opportunity to realize his need for himself. He writes, “The man did not experience all the sorts of relationships God intended humanity to have, for there was no suitable collaborator for him (2:20). Once Adam realized this need, God worked to fill it, thus bringing to fruition the range of relations God purposed to create.” See *The God Who Risks*, 44.
Thus we see that a male and female humanity was God’s design from the beginning. Genesis 2:4-25 simply works out the progression of God’s creation of humanity in greater detail. The end result is exactly as planned: The man and woman come together in marital union, thus fulfilling their God-ordained function.

VIII. Conclusion

A careful study of the creation narrative reveals an understanding of God in some ways different from that put forth by open theism. God’s meticulous providence—doubted by open theists—is arguably the impetus for all the activity recorded in the creation narrative. There are no competing forces able to thwart God’s purpose, and there seems to be nothing that can resist his will. God openly asserts his power over creation, even as he demonstrates his unfailing love by graciously sustaining his fledgling creatures. At least up to this point, everything in creation proceeds exactly as God intends.
CHAPTER THREE
HUMAN SIN AND THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

If the creation narrative is significant because it “sets the stage for…providence,” then the account that follows is equally pivotal because it calls into question the very notion of providence. What was previously described as “very good” (1:31) takes a disastrous turn for the worse. God’s human creatures, who bear the stamp of his sovereignty, assert their independence from the one who made them. The entire project seems to unravel before our eyes: Chapter 3 ends with humanity’s alienation from God. Is there any room for interpreting the Fall of humanity within the context of God’s absolute sovereignty, or does the very reality of sin undermine such a view of providence?

IX. Open Theism on Humanity’s Fall and the Origins of Evil

Open theism’s explanation of the Fall proceeds from its understanding of creation. As noted in the previous chapter, open theists describe creation as an act of divine self-limitation. Having reigned in the forces of chaos, God establishes boundaries for creation within which he freely shares power. Specifically, he shares power with human beings, making them his co-creators. In doing so, God rejects the option of “exhaustive divine control,” instead choosing to create “significant others and [giving] them ‘space’ to operate.”

In this context, God seeks to place but one restriction on humanity’s exercise of divinely-given freedom: Adam and Eve must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—in other words, they must not presume to know (that is, determine) good and evil for themselves. The man and woman are expected to believe that God really has “their best interests in mind.” Sanders argues that to go against this one prohibition would undermine

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92 Note the discussion of ancient Near Eastern parallels to the concept of imagio dei in “The Sovereignty of God in the Creation of Humanity.”

God’s entire plan for creation—a risk to which God freely makes himself vulnerable by issuing the injunction in the first place.\textsuperscript{94}

Notwithstanding the risk inherent to creation, everyone’s expectation, according to John Sanders, is that love and trust will continue between God and his creation. God himself expects nothing less:

\textit{God expects humans to trust God and believe that he has their best interests in mind. God, in freedom, establishes the context in which a loving and trusting relationship between himself and the humans can develop. God expects that it will, and there is no reason to suspect, at this point in the narrative, that any other possibility will come about. A break in the relationship does not seem plausible considering all the good that God has done.}\textsuperscript{95}

In other words, the events of Genesis 3 are not anticipated—not even by God. Again, in Sanders words: “In Genesis 3 the totally unexpected happens” (emphasis added). From within God’s own creation a challenge is mustered as the serpent seeks an audience with the woman (3:1). The fact that such a conversation even takes place indicates that, “God’s work and words are open to being discussed.” It is a dialogue that God makes possible—even to the point of questioning his wisdom. This is a necessary condition in order for humans to be able to respond to God in genuine freedom, according to Sanders. The fact that discussion of God’s command takes place in Genesis 3 is not a problem in itself; what causes alarm is that the serpent “takes advantage of [the God-ordained] openness by suggesting a different possible future from the one God had proclaimed.”\textsuperscript{96}

In tempting the woman, the serpent casts doubt on the prohibition. He suggests that God is really trying to keep something good from his creatures. The serpent counters the divine threat of death with a promise of godlike enlightenment. His words are proved true, but at the expense of humanity’s relationship with God.\textsuperscript{97}

In describing the interchange between God and the accused parties in Genesis 3:8-19, Sanders makes key several assumptions. First, Sanders assumes that God’s original plan for

\textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 45. A point Sanders makes with great confidence, noting in a footnote on page 291 that those who affirm meticulous providence have “a very difficult time accounting for this (without impugning God’s goodness).”

\textsuperscript{95} Sanders, The God Who Risks, 45-46.

\textsuperscript{96} All quotes in this paragraph \textit{ibid.}, 45-47.

\textsuperscript{97} \textit{Ibid.}, 46-47.
creation has indeed failed. When confronted by God, Adam shifted blame—first to the woman and ultimately to God himself (3:12). By doing so Adam claimed that, “God’s purposes ha[d] failed.” Though Adam is wrong for pointing fingers, Sanders is sympathetic with his overall assessment of the situation, noting that the drastic turn of events in Genesis 3 “is not…what God intended.” Similarly, Clark Pinnock comments that after the Fall, history became a genuine struggle between God and his creation; humanity’s activity was “disruptive of the historical process.”98 Because God’s original plan for creation ended in failure, God was forced “to adjust his project in response.”99 Redemption, then, is simply a “Plan B” put into effect only after the “implausible” happens.100

Second, Sanders appears to take God’s inquiry (3:9, 11, 13) at face value as a sincere attempt to understand why Adam and Eve rebelled against him. Sanders points out that there was no comprehensible reason for them to disobey God: “There is never a good reason to sin, only rationalizations.”101 Given the implausibility of what has transpired, it seems natural to take God’s interrogation as a genuine effort to fathom why his creation has turned on him. This is consistent with one of the key motifs of future openness described by Gregory Boyd: God sometimes expresses surprise at how things come to pass (cf. Jeremiah 3:7).102

Third, Sanders interprets God’s response to humanity’s sin as a “divine relenting from negative consequences in favor of mercy.”103 Such a view is in harmony with yet another of Boyd’s openness motifs: “God changes his mind in response to events that

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99 Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 47-48. Clark Pinnock takes a similar perspective on the failures of Israel. According to Pinnock, God’s sovereign plan for Israel was thwarted. Pinnock writes, “This required a new initiative on God’s part and led to the unique role of Jesus.” Thus, Jesus’ role was only determined by the failure of Israel. See Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 37.
100 See Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 113. To quote Pinnock: “God has the power and ability to be…one who responds and adapts to surprises and to the unexpected. God sets goals for creation and redemption and realizes them ad hoc in history. If Plan A fails, God is ready with Plan B.” Cf. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 58.
transpire in history.” In Genesis 2:17, God promised immediate death for the one who ate of the forbidden tree. Yet the first couple lived long after the Fall—Adam to the ripe old age of 930 years! Put bluntly by Sanders, “When God faces the sin, he cannot bring himself to fulfill [his] threat.”

God remains faithful to creation after the Fall; but according to open theism, life now consists of an “ongoing struggle” in which God’s efforts on our behalf are not always met with success. After Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden, God struggles in vain to get things back on track; his will is undermined repeatedly by sin’s exponential growth. In his grief, God nearly gives up on the entire project—only to discover a single righteous man worth saving. Sanders writes, “In Noah God finds a possibility for a future that is open despite the pervasiveness of sin” (see Genesis 6:8). Perhaps nowhere else do we see more clearly the consequences of God’s self-limitation than in the events following humanity’s Fall. Open theism customarily describes any divine limitation as voluntarily self-imposed; however, God in Genesis 6 appears to suffer from an externally imposed limitation. Sanders’ interpretation of the post-Fall world pictures God as being helpless until he discovers Noah, the lone righteous man (6:8). Thus God’s options here are limited—not by his own free choice but by the circumstances of a world not fully under his control.

X. A Cautionary Word About the Fall

Before we address open theism’s interpretation of the Fall, a word of caution is in order: Genesis 3 should not be looked upon as a philosophical treatise on the problem of evil; no attempt at theodicy is made here. Genesis 3 simply continues the account (toledot) that began in Genesis 2:4; it tells what became of the first man and woman. (Subsequent chapters unpack the consequences of Adam and Eve’s choice for their descendants.) While elsewhere

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104 Boyd, 75.


106 See Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 113 and 118. Pinnock argues that any change in God is purely voluntary: “When I say that God is subject to change, I am referring to a uniquely divine kind of changeability. I do not mean that God is subject to change involuntarily, which would make God a contingent being, but that God allows the world to touch him, while being transcendent over it.”

107 On one level, this can be said of Scripture in general. Job’s demand for an explanation for his sufferings, for example, never receives a direct answer, though God leaves no room to question his sovereign control of earthly affairs (see Job 38–41).

This should give pause to conventional theists looking to harmonize the reality of evil with their belief in God’s absolute sovereignty—but also to open theists seeking to defend their view of a self-limited God. On the one hand, one cannot prove from the immediate context that God ordained the Fall as a part of his redemptive agenda.\footnote{It is my opinion, however, that there are scriptural indicators of this outside Genesis 3.} On the other hand, many of open theism’s conclusions about the entrance of sin lack seem to lack support from the text, as argued below.

\textit{XI. Responding to Open Theism’s Interpretation of the Fall}

There are ways in which open theism’s explanation of the Fall is commendable. Specifically, open theism appreciates how truly disastrous the Fall was for God’s creation. Evil is rightly deplored as something inexplicable—something to be lamented rather than just a natural part of creation to be accepted with resignation. God is not impugned for the Fall; sin, rather, is shown to be completely foreign to his nature.\footnote{Henri Blocher, \textit{Evil and the Cross} (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 55-57.} Open theism’s interpretation of the Fall is motivated by a sincere desire to make sense of both the goodness of God and the reality of evil.

At the same time, open theism’s presuppositions about the nature of human freedom and divine self-limitation influence its interpretation of the narrative to a degree that perhaps the text is made to say things about the nature of providence that it arguably does not say. There are potential weaknesses in open theism’s understanding of the Fall (and its implications for providence).
**A. The Implausibility of an Implausible Fall**

As already noted, John Sanders describes the Fall as unthinkable, even to the mind of God. There is, Sanders argues, no good reason to expect that God’s creatures, created to enjoy every blessing of providence, will rebel. In a pristine, idyllic environment like the garden, such a turn of events is unthinkable.

What is unthinkable to the reader, however, is not necessarily so for God. More to the point, Sanders’ assumption has serious implications for divine knowledge—implications with which all theists, conventional and open, would be uncomfortable.

Pinnock and others note carefully open theism’s affirmation of divine omniscience (the belief that God knows everything). However, they differ with conventional theists on the actual definition of omniscience. The logic of open theism is this: To the extent that the future is undetermined, it does not exist; so there is nothing that can be known about it. Thus open theism concludes, “God knows everything that can be known.”\(^{111}\) This includes all past and present knowledge, and some future knowledge (to the degree that God has determined the future). But God cannot have knowledge of an indeterminate future, since it is by nature something that does not yet exist.

It is precisely here that open theism’s theological commitments conflict with its reading of the narrative. To hold Sanders’ interpretation of the Fall, one must either abandon even the narrowest definition of omniscience or concede that open theism fails to get God “off the hook” for the problem of evil.

We learn from the narrative that God himself established the conditions necessary for the Fall.\(^ {112}\) It was he who planted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the middle of the garden: “Out of the ground the LORD God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:9). God formed the tree, placed it in a central location and warned the man not to eat of it, lest he die (2:17). Why, if God’s plan were for human beings to live forever in the garden, would he plant a lethal threat in the midst of their habitat? The tree of the knowledge of good and evil represented the chance to be like God

\(^{111}\) Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 123.

\(^{112}\) It is unlikely Sanders would dispute this premise, since according to Sanders, autonomous human freedom is one of those necessary conditions. See Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 47.
(cf. Genesis 3:5, 22). To eat its fruit was to know good and evil—to assume for one’s self the prerogative to determine what is right and wrong. This tree was humanity’s chance to declare its moral independence from God. Why would God risk that? No sensible parent concerned for his or her young child’s nutritional well-being would put an open jar of candy in the middle of the floor, leave that child unattended, and justifiably expect the candy to remain untouched. All evangelicals agree that God’s wisdom exceeds that of even the best parents; why would he make such a dramatic blunder that no sensible parent would make—especially when the very future of creation is at stake?

In Genesis 2–3, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents a divine test. Bruce Waltke explains, “The priestly guardians of the sanctuary are tested for their obedience to God” (emphasis added). In the garden, Adam and Eve function in a probationary, representative capacity. Later Scriptures reveal that in his response to this test, Adam acted on behalf of all the generations that followed (see Romans 5:12-14, 1 Corinthians 15:22).

What could the purpose of such a test be? Open theism does not give a direct answer, but a helpful parallel might be found in John Sanders’ interpretation of Genesis 22. Here God tests Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac, the child of the promise (cf. Genesis 15:1-6, 21:1). Sanders explains the significance of this test as follows:

*God desired to see whether Abraham trusted him... The test is genuine, not fake... God needs to know if Abraham is the sort of person on whom God can count for collaboration toward the fulfillment of the divine project. Will he be faithful? Or must God find someone else through whom to achieve his purpose? ...In [Genesis] 15:8 Abraham asked God for assurance. Now it is God seeking assurance from Abraham.*

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116 It is on this basis that evangelicals affirm the doctrine of original sin.

It is not difficult to imagine open theism offering a similar explanation for the test in the garden of Eden: God desired to see whether Adam and Eve would trust him. The test involving the tree is genuine, not fake. God needs to know if Adam and Eve are the sort of people on whom he can depend.

However, such an interpretation has dubious implications for even the barest understanding of omniscience. The kind of knowledge needed to know whether Abraham trusts God is present knowledge, not future knowledge. Such a test as that found in Genesis 22 gives no assurance that Abraham will trust God in the future; it only reveals where he is in relationship to God at that moment. (Thus if God lacks future knowledge, the test is of little help in telling him whether Abraham can be counted on years later.) So to say this test is for God’s benefit is to say that God does not know something about the present state of affairs.118 This not only challenges God’s omniscience; it calls into question his faithfulness and competence. Abraham is said to have “believed the LORD” already in Genesis 15; in response God credited Abraham’s faith as righteousness (15:6). In chapter 15 God establishes an unconditional covenant with Abraham, promising to provide an heir for him and to make a great nation from his offspring. If the purpose of the test in chapter 22 is to find out “if Abraham is the sort of person on whom God can count,” then either God has forgotten the promise to which he has irreversibly bound himself or worse, he cannot be trusted to keep that promise should circumstances change.119 More important, to say this test is for God’s benefit is to deny God’s knowledge of the inner workings of the human heart and mind. Elsewhere, however, Scripture attests to God’s perfect understanding of every human thought (1 Samuel 16:7, 1 Chronicles 28:9, Psalm 139:1-4).

Likewise in the garden of Eden, to say that the test is for God’s sake is to reject his omniscience—whatever one’s definition of omniscience may be. It is certain that God observed the dialogue between the serpent and Eve (as the ability to do so requires only simple present knowledge). Given Eve’s lack of surprise at the serpent’s speech in Genesis 3, it is possible that the two had even had previous conversations.120 In any case, the temptation and the human couple’s response to it probably could not have taken God by surprise. If God already knows the hearts of men and women, then is it truly accurate to say that the tests given in Genesis 3 and 22 were for God’s benefit?

The narrative of Genesis 3 provokes another troubling question, in light of God’s present knowledge: If God had perfect insight into Eve’s thoughts, and if he could see where dialogue with the serpent was leading (this would not be too much to expect of a


119 The fact that this is an unconditional covenant is significant. Unlike other covenants in Scripture, the fulfillment of this one did not depend on Abraham. The Abrahamic covenant remained in force even when Abraham faltered, seeking unnecessarily to “help” providence by fathering a child with Hagar (Ge 16) and telling Sarah to lie out of fear for his life (Ge 20).

120 Hartley, *Genesis*, 65.
God who can anticipate with great accuracy a person’s next move),

why did he not intervene? Surely such intervention would not have to infringe upon human freedom, since God could use this opportunity to persuade rather than coerce Eve to obedience. Indeed, Clark Pinnock laments that conventional theology’s emphasis on almightiness neglects the possibility of persuasion as a tool whereby God influences his creation in a non-determinative fashion. If persuasion is so highly valued, why is God silent in Genesis 3:1-7? Why not at least attempt a rebuttal of the serpent’s half-truths with which he deceived the woman? To be sure, God had previously made known his desire for obedience—that is, his moral will that Adam obey—along with the penalty for disobedience (see 2:16-17). Here it is helpful to note that Scripture appears to make a distinction between God’s moral will and his sovereign will (see Appendix: The Concept of God’s Will in Scripture). All would agree that human beings violated God’s moral will in Genesis 3. But if his sovereign will were in jeopardy too, it seems plausible that God, who is said to have our best interest in mind, would have done anything short of coercion to prevent the rebellion and ensuing disaster recorded Genesis 3.

In any case, it does not seem likely to me that humanity’s fall came as a surprise to God. To be sure, God does not tempt human beings; that is the serpent’s role, according to Genesis 3:1 (cf. James 1:13-14). However, he did, in fact, place the tree—the object of the temptation—in the middle of the garden as a test for humanity. (The narrative even goes to the trouble of informing us that the serpent, who brought the temptation, was one of the “wild animal[s] that the LORD God had made” [3:1, emphasis added].) Comparing the test of Abraham in Genesis 22, we have observed the difficulty of claiming that such a test is for God’s benefit. God need not test us to know our thoughts; and if his plan for creation was jeopardized in Genesis 3 as open theism would assume, I find it hard to understand why he did not intervene, not even to reason with the very creatures who bear his image.

B. The Question of Human Freedom

Perhaps one of the most compelling arguments for open theism’s interpretation of the Fall is that it respects human freedom. William Hasker notes that, “Christian thinkers have almost without exception wanted to say that human beings are free in some sense.” For open


122 Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” 116. Pinnock describes persuasion as “a noble form that has been neglected in [the conventional] tradition, where power tends to be associated, even equated with coercion.”


125 And thus have the ability to reason themselves.
theists, people are free specifically in the libertarian sense. That is, “An agent is free with respect to a given action at a given time if at that time it is within the agent’s power to perform the action and also in the agent’s power to refrain from the action.”126 In other words, no outside force can determine a free being’s course of action, though there may indeed be various factors that influence (but not determine) his or her choices.

Open theism has made no effort to prove its understanding of human freedom; it is simply assumed.127 This should come as no surprise, since Scripture appears silent on the matter. Nowhere is human freedom explicitly affirmed within the pages of Scripture.128 Nor does Bible attempt to deny its existence. Scripture, rather, is silent on the question of human freedom. As a result, inquiries into its nature tend to be more philosophical than biblical in character.129

At the same time, libertarian freedom seems to be one of open theism’s vital assumptions—to the degree that the endowment of freedom is necessary if God is truly a loving God. For Richard Rice, for example, divine love demands that God’s relationships with humanity involve “genuine interaction”—that is, if God truly loves us, he ought to grant freedom to the extent that as a consequence human beings can “have an effect on him.”130 Similarly, Clark Pinnock writes that a loving God should not be described as “dominating others but [as] sharing with them.” Pinnock asserts that divine love is not authentic unless it “brings with it the risk of rejection,” which, in turn, is only possible if human beings have libertarian freedom.131 Given the importance of libertarian freedom to open theism, it seems strange that Clark Pinnock is willing to assume rather than prove his understanding of it.

Furthermore, if autonomous free will were as vital to our understanding of God’s love as open theism suggests, then it would seem appropriate—even necessary—that God never predetermine human choice.132 Yet even some open theists seem willing to concede that God


127 See Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 41. Pinnock writes: “Scripture, like human experience itself, assumes libertarian freedom, i.e. the freedom to perform an action or refrain from it.”


129 I am grateful to Dr. Michael Wittmer for making this point.


132 Open theism regards human freedom as necessary in order for relationships between God and people to have any real integrity. If this were so, then any violation of that freedom would be morally suspect.
occasion	ly foreordains the choices people make. Clark Pinnock and Gregory Boyd, for example, acknowledge that some aspects of the future—perhaps including the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and Judas’ betrayal of Jesus—are in some respects predetermined.\textsuperscript{133}

Additional examples of God predetermining human choices can be provided. In the next chapter, I will argue that God predestined individual human decisions as a part of his redemptive agenda; but a few comments are worth making here. There are at least three ways in which God is said to ordain people’s choices. First, God is said to govern the hearts of kings and common people alike (see Psalm 33:13-15, Proverbs 21:1). If, as John Frame suggests, the heart is the seat of decision-making (cf. Luke 6:43-45), then in ruling the heart, God in some way exercises sovereignty over human choice.\textsuperscript{134}

Second, God determines the makeup of individuals; he forms each person in his or her mother’s womb (Psalm 139:13). David credited God for creating his “inmost being” (NIV)—literally his kidneys, which for the Hebrew were the seat of the emotions and moral consciousness.\textsuperscript{135} Furthermore, God forms human beings with purpose. Isaiah, Jeremiah and Paul each claimed to have been set apart before their formation in the womb for their part in redemptive history (see Isaiah 49:1, 15; Jeremiah 1:5; Galatians 1:15). In fact, God is said to have formed the whole community of Israel “in the womb” (Isaiah 44:1, 24). While these passages do not explicitly speak of God determining individual human choice, such a conclusion is perhaps inevitable if we accept the claims made by these texts. How, for example, could God “know” (in this context, a euphemism for choose) Jeremiah before he was formed in the womb unless God foreordained the relationship between Jeremiah’s mother and father?\textsuperscript{136} Throughout Scripture, we are confronted by the reality that God’s redemptive work proceeds according to some long-standing plan (whether that plan was ordained before or after the Fall). For God to ordain that a certain person would play a

\textsuperscript{133} See Boyd, God of the Possible, 38. Also Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 47-53. Open theism is not uniform on this point. While Boyd is willing to concede that certain texts portray God determining the choices of pivotal individuals in redemptive history—e.g., Pharaoh, Judas—Sanders denies that human choice was predetermined in either case. See Sanders, The God Who Risks, 58-59 and 98-99.

\textsuperscript{134} Frame, No Other God, p., 65.


\textsuperscript{136} Frame, No Other God, 64.
certain role in that plan, he would have to control both his or her choice to serve him and the
sovereign choices of all his or her ancestors.  

Third—and perhaps most disquieting for many evangelicals—God is said to control
even the evil deeds people commit. The author of Psalm 105 declares that God turned the
Egyptians’ hearts against the enslaved Hebrews (v. 25). Before Moses uttered a word to
Pharaoh, God promised to harden Egyptian ruler’s heart. Likewise, God hardened the
hearts of the Canaanites, inciting them to fight Israel during Joshua’s conquest (Joshua
11:20). In 2 Samuel 24, God “incited” (v. 1) David to take an unwarranted military census,
resulting in Israel’s judgment. According to Isaiah 10:5-7, God used the pagan nation of
Assyria to judge Judah; Assyria was divinely sent to “seize loot and snatch plunder” (10:6).
The prophet Habakkuk was horrified that the very God who is “too pure to behold evil”
(Habakkuk 1:13) would use a notoriously cruel, pagan nation as an instrument of judgment
against his covenant people. Indeed the most heinous crime of all, the murder of Jesus
Christ, was perpetrated according to “God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (Acts 2:23).

My purpose in noting these examples is not to deny the existence of human
freedom. Rather, I wish to challenge open theism’s understanding of such freedom. If the fact
that a human being has genuine liberty is a necessary sign of God’s love, then what does it
mean for God to occasionally determine a person’s choice? If divine sovereignty is
incompatible with human freedom, then would this not mean that God has violated that
person’s freedom and therefore does not love him or her? If, however, divine sovereignty and
human freedom are not incompatible, then there is nothing inherently wrong with God
predetermining the choices people make. It is not necessary to assume that such

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137 Note Psalm 105:24’s contribution to our understanding of God’s sovereignty. It is God who made
the people of Israel “very fruitful” during their time in Egypt; it was he who made them “too numerous for their
foes.”

138 On several occasions God is said to harden Pharaoh’s heart; elsewhere the text says simply that
Pharaoh’s heart “became hard.” God promises twice to harden Pharaoh’s heart before the first confrontation
ever takes place. Contrary to what Sanders writes, there is nothing in the text to indicate that God’s statement is
conditional. (Cf. Sanders, The God Who Risks, 59.)

139 Here we appreciate the important distinction between immediate and mediate causality. Habakkuk’s
description of God as one “too pure to look on evil” is correct. Though God is sovereign over all the affairs of
his creation, evil is nonetheless something to be deplored. It is directly perpetrated by forces opposed to God,
yet these forces of evil are powerless apart from the enabling will of God (cf. Job 1). See “The Problem of Evil”
below.
predestination overrules genuine freedom, assuming we are content to live with an element of paradox in our theology. Open theism generally resists the paradox of divine sovereignty and human freedom, saying that one must inevitably give way to the other. However, it seems strange that a theology claiming to be founded upon the ultimate Christian paradox, the Trinity, expresses such strong distaste for the paradox of divine sovereignty and human freedom.

Also, it is perhaps valid to question the notion of human freedom specifically as open theism describes it. In other words, while I do not reject the idea of human freedom in its entirety, I do question the specifically libertarian view of human freedom espoused by open theism. There is a danger in taking our understanding of freedom too far. The very sin into which the first couple fell was a quest for godlike wisdom—autonomous knowledge of good and evil that would grant them independence from their creator. The story of humanity’s fall is arguably that of a failed effort to achieve the very kind of libertarian autonomy that open theism considers innate to human nature.

C. God’s Purposes With Regard to the Fall

According to open theism, God’s original purpose for creation was thrown radically off course by Adam and Eve’s sin in the garden. What was supposed to be a history of unbroken fellowship between Creator and creation degraded into a story of genuine struggle—the outcome of which has often seemed in doubt. God, being infinitely resourceful, was able to start working toward a solution, redemption; but that solution was little more than “Plan B.”

To be sure, the Fall was enormously disruptive. The tranquil of the garden was utterly ruined: discord replaced harmony; suspicion destroyed mutual trust (see Genesis 3:11). However, I have already noted that God often works through discord and disaster to accomplish his sovereign purpose. While Genesis 3 does not explicitly pronounce God’s sovereignty over the events of the narrative (as already noted, the text does not bother to

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140 See Pinnock, “Reconstructing Evangelical Theology: A Self-Critical Assessment.” According to Pinnock, “The open view of God is a trinitarian theology in which Father, Son and Spirit eternally give and receive love.”

141 Sailhamer, Genesis, 51. Waltke, Genesis, 86.

142 Mathews, Genesis 1–11:26, 226
explain the problem of evil), conversely there is nothing in the text that rules out this understanding. Given (a) the affirmation of God’s absolute sovereignty throughout Scripture and (b) the Hebrew tendency to attribute all historical phenomena to God, there seems to be little reason to assume that God’s sovereignty was somehow suspended by the Fall.

How can the Fall be a tragedy of disastrous proportions and a part of God’s plan for human history? I noted earlier that one of open theism’s strengths is its refusal to wink at evil; humanity’s sin is mourned and condemned. Because evil is so deplorable, it cannot be of any use to a holy God carrying out his plans, according to open theism. Open theists regard the reality of evil as antithetical to belief in God’s absolutely sovereignty. Open theism concludes, therefore, that evil cannot have any place in the will of God. By making such a sweeping assertion, open theism dismisses what I believe to be the overwhelming weight of Scripture attesting to God’s meticulous sovereignty. This fallacy can be explained by open theism’s tendency to regard God’s will as a monolith; the literature of open theism fails to distinguish between the two overlapping but sometimes distinct aspects of God’s will. Careful study of the biblical concept of God’s “will” reveals that God has a moral will (i.e., the ethical expectations according to which people ought to live) and a sovereign will (God’s plan for the course of history). This distinction is addressed further in my appendix, The Concept of God’s Will in Scripture.

The distinction between God’s sovereign will and moral will can be demonstrated by the following example: the God who (in terms of his moral will) deplores evil and demands absolute righteousness also sovereignly used the Babylonians’ wickedness to judge the rebellious people of Judah (see Habakkuk 1:5-17). At the same time, it should not be concluded from this that God has two competing wills, since his sovereign use of evil works toward a morally righteous end—in this case the judgment of sin. Thus God remains fully just in all he does, while those through whom he sovereignly works remain accountable for their choices. While remembering that the Fall narrative itself gives no comment on the relationship between God’s sovereignty and the events that transpired in the garden, it is possible—given the weight of evidence throughout the rest of

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143 By contrast, see Henri Blocher’s *Evil and the Cross* for an example of a theodicy that takes both the repugnance of evil and the sovereignty of God seriously.

144 To quote Blocher:

The great proof-texts leave scarcely any loophole for any who would wish to doubt. But also the spontaneous, almost incidental, expressions of conviction about the sovereignty of God about to the point of drowning by their sheer number the categorical declarations. (*Evil and the Cross*, 90)
Scripture—that the fall of humanity could be placed under God’s absolute sovereignty while still being morally repugnant to his holiness.

**D. The Divine Interrogation**

What can be said about God’s interrogation of the human couple (Genesis 3:8-13)? If the Fall were inconceivable to the mind of God, as Sanders has suggested, then it would seem reasonable to read the divine inquiries of Genesis 3:9, 11 and 13 as a sincere attempt on God’s part to understand why humanity has turned against him. Surprised by what has come to pass, God enters into genuine dialogue in a quest for understanding. Questions like, “Where are you?” and, “Who told you that you were naked?” and, “What is this you have done?” reflect God’s effort to come to terms with the incomprehensible.

However, the view that God is engaged in a genuine quest for information is problematic. I have already discussed the presuppositions underlying this view and their weaknesses. However, there are additional reasons to question this view.

It is possible that, in his interrogation of the human couple, God acts as both redeemer and judge. Instead of bellowing commands and condemnations, God questions the man and woman, apparently in a successful effort to draw them from their hiding place. Some commentators have likened God to a “good shepherd” and a “gentle father” for doing so. God seems to give Adam and Eve the opportunity to accept responsibility for their actions, though they fail to do so (see Genesis 3:10, 13).

God’s questions, however, do not imply a lack of understanding on his part. It seems unreasonable, for example, to assume on the basis of God’s first question that he does not know where the man is hiding. The very fact that God directed his question “to the man” may indicate that Adam’s effort to escape God’s sight was indeed futile. With respect to Genesis 3:9, one commentator has noted,

*The commentators who consider the question to be aimed at discovering where the man was hiding have overlooked the words to him. They have likewise disregarded the fact that [Genesis 3:14-19] relates that the Lord God determined the fate of the man and his wife and the serpent according to His will; since the subsequent narrative portrays God as*

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145 See “The implausibility of an implausible Fall.”


147 Note the parallel to this question in Genesis 4:9, where God asks Cain where his brother is, while Abel’s blood is crying out to him from the ground (4:10).
omnipotent, it stands to reason that He is not depicted here as one who is unaware of what is around him.\textsuperscript{148}

In Genesis 3:9, God is like a knowing parent who employs skillful interrogation to elicit the intended response from the one being questioned.\textsuperscript{149} In this case, Adam does not answer God’s question directly ("Here am I."); he responds by revealing himself and explaining why he hid.

God’s response to his creatures also reveals his role as sovereign judge. The inquiry begins with a divine summons: “The LORD God called to the man” (Genesis 3:9). It was customary in the ancient Near East for suzerains to demand an account of their covenant partners by means of such a summoning.\textsuperscript{150} Once Adam and Eve answer the summons, God begins the prosecution. The divine Judge shows justice by withholding judgment until the human couple is given opportunity to confess.\textsuperscript{151}

In short, the context of Genesis 3:8-13 does not appear to suggest either that God is surprised by the events recorded therein or that he lacks understanding of the situation. Rather, the narrative highlights God’s superiority to his creation: he is the skillful interrogator, the righteous prosecutor and the sovereign judge.

\textit{E. Did God Relent?}

When one compares the threatened punishment for eating from the tree (Genesis 2:17) with the actual consequences described in 3:14-19, there at first seems to be a troubling discrepancy. Genesis 2:17 speaks of immediate consequences: “When you eat of [the tree] you will surely die.” Yet the man and woman did not experience physical death the moment they ate. At first glance the serpent’s assurances that Eve and her husband would not die appear proven true (see Genesis 3:4).\textsuperscript{152} How is this explained? For John Sanders, the answer is not that the serpent was right and God was wrong; rather, Genesis 3:14-19 is read as an example of divine relenting. Other Scriptures describe God relenting from some plan of his

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{148} Cassuto, \textit{A Commentary on the Book of Genesis}, 155-156.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{149} See Wenham, \textit{Genesis 1–15}, 76-77}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{150} \textit{Ibid.}}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{151} See Hamilton, \textit{The Book of Genesis}, 194; Sailhamer, \textit{Genesis}, 52-54; Waltke, \textit{Genesis}, 92.}

(Genesis 18:22-33; Jeremiah 18:7-8; Hosea 11:8-9). In Genesis 3, according to Sanders, God simply cannot bring himself to follow through with the promised punishment.

Sanders’ interpretation of Genesis 3:14-19 considerably underestimates the severity of God’s response to human sin. It is true that *physical* death did not come on the heels of rebellion (though such death came in due time). But physical expiration is just one aspect of death; it is death in the narrowest sense only. The point of God’s warning in Genesis 2:17 was not that the rebellious human would be killed on the spot; it was that in eating of the forbidden tree, humanity would pass from the *realm* of life into the *realm* of death. Practically everything in the garden symbolized the realm of life—trees (3:9), rivers (3:10-11), gold (3:12) and especially the tree of life (3:9). Above all, the garden of Eden was characterized by the presence of God. For the Hebrew, life and God’s presence were synonymous. The choice between obedience to God and disobedience was a choice between the realms of life and death (Deuteronomy 30:11-20; cf. Proverbs 19:23). Moses revealed that the LORD himself was life for the child of the covenant (Deuteronomy 30:20). In Hebrew worship, “true life was experienced when one went into the sanctuary,” as Gordon Wenham notes. Death, by contrast, was experienced when one was exiled to life “outside the camp.” Several images from Scripture illustrate this reality. On the Day of Atonement, the scapegoat bearing Israel’s sin was sent “outside the camp” (Leviticus 16:20-22). Those who were unclean were forced to live “outside the camp,” away from God’s presence. Indicating the seriousness of such an exile, the unclean were commanded to tear their clothes, cover their faces and keep their hair unkempt (Leviticus 14:45-46). Notably, Jesus was executed “under God’s curse” (Deuteronomy 21:23) and crucified “outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:11-13).

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153 This can only be a result of God’s grace. Genesis 2:7 records that God “breathed…the breath of life” into Adam, giving him life. ( Humanity’s dependence on God’s sustaining power is also symbolized in Genesis by the tree of life.) Even after Adam’s sin, God continued to breathe the breath of life into Adam and all his descendants. Indeed, God’s sustaining power is the only thing that enables the world to continue after the Fall (see Psalm 36:9; Proverbs 14:27). It is not that the serpent was vindicated (cf. Genesis 3:4); God proved merciful by not doing away with his creation at the first sign of rebellion.

154 Compare the imagery of Revelation 21–22.


156 I am grateful to Dr. James Grier for pointing out the significance of the life/death motif in the Mosaic covenant.
In the garden of Eden, death occurred the moment Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden—that is, from God’s presence. The death experienced in consequence of their sin was in fact the most severe type of death possible: separation from the giver and sustainer of life. Fellowship with God became unattainable apart from divine intervention. Access to the tree of life was barred (Genesis 3:22-24). God no longer gave freely of every tree in the garden but instead required the man to “toil” for his food (cf. Genesis 2: 16 and 3:17-19). Furthermore, what food the man gathered from the ground would no longer sustain him indefinitely; physical death was inevitable.

Thus Genesis 3:14-19 can hardly be read as a divine relenting from the promised consequences of sin. Such an interpretation is rendered even less plausible by a comparison with the other “divine relenting” passages in Scripture. In Jeremiah 18:7-8, God’s decision to relent is based on human repentance. In Hosea 11:8-9, God decides to relent from any inclination to “give up” his people (11:8b) because it is revealed that he has other plans for them:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{They shall go after the LORD,} \\
\text{who roars like a lion;} \\
\text{when he roars,} \\
\text{his children will come trembling from the west.}
\end{align*}
\]

—Hosea 11:10\(^{157}\)

Even in Genesis 18:22-33, God’s willingness to relent depends upon the presence of “righteous people” in the city of Sodom.\(^{158}\) These passages demonstrate an essential condition for divine relenting—namely, Scripture does not allow us to conceive of a “divine relenting” apart from a particular human disposition toward God.\(^{159}\) But Genesis 3:14-19 does not fit such a model. There is no indication of repentance when God confronts Adam and Eve; on the contrary, the human couple makes a lame effort to

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\(^{157}\) In other words, God’s relenting is related to a sovereign plan that supercedes the destruction of a rebellious people. Note carefully that in 11:7, God notes that his people “are determined to turn” from him (emphasis added). Yet God calls them back to himself; Hosea 11:10 seems to indicate that this is not a call that can be resisted.

\(^{158}\) What is more, to interpret God’s willingness to relent as an example of God’s plans being genuinely altered by his creation creates a serious difficulty for open theism. If such is the case in Genesis 18, then we must assume either (1) that God genuinely intended to destroy the righteous in Sodom along with the wicked, (2) that God did not care whether the righteous were destroyed along with the wicked or (3) that God was so incompetent that it had not occurred to him that he might destroy the righteous along with the wicked until Abraham brought this to his attention. Thus we are left with a God who either is unjust (based on open theism’s own presuppositions about evil and God’s sovereignty), uncaring or inept.

\(^{159}\) It was noted in the excursus on God’s will that his relenting falls easily within the parameters of his sovereign will; for in relenting, God is only doing what he has declared he will do under a certain set of circumstances (Jeremiah 18:7-8).
dodge responsibility for their actions (see Genesis 3:12-13).\textsuperscript{160} Contrary to open theism’s view of divine relenting, God’s punishment of humanity proceeds as exactly as planned in Genesis 3:14-19.

Reading Genesis 3:14-19 as an example of divine relenting creates raises an important question: How can open theism interpret God’s judgment in Genesis 3 in this manner without unintentionally calling into question God’s reliability to remain faithful to his promises? In Genesis 3, according to Sanders, God’s righteous judgment cannot be counted on, even though it was promised in 2:17.\textsuperscript{161} On what basis, then, can we anticipate with confidence the final judgment promised in Scripture? The book of Revelation teaches that God’s final judgment is necessary (in part) to avenge the blood of the martyrs (Revelation 6:10), but what guarantee is there that God will have the stomach for it when the time comes? If he lacked the will to follow through on his promised judgment of two unrepentant individuals in the garden, how much more difficult will it be for God to bring himself to keep his word when an entire multitude of people stand in eternal peril? Open theism may have inadvertently opened the door to universalism and claims that God’s promise cannot be relied upon.

\textbf{XII. The Sovereignty of God in the Fall and its Aftermath}

The preceding section noted several problems with open theism’s description of the Fall as an event in which humanity’s choice effectively thwarted God’s sovereign will. The main problem seems to be open theism’s failure to distinguish between God’s sovereign and moral will. I have stated reasons why such an interpretation should not be taken; but is there any positive evidence that God’s sovereignty remains intact despite humanity’s sin? There are, in fact, numerous indicators of divine sovereignty continuing even through the Fall and its aftermath. While the narrative never says, “The Fall took place in keeping with the sovereign will of God,” it nonetheless gives reason to believe that God remains absolutely sovereign in relation to his creation.

\textbf{A. Humanity’s Absolute Dependence on God Reaffirmed}

Humanity’s rebellion was a failed effort to gain independence from its Creator. By eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam and Eve sought to define moral reality for themselves. Charmed by the serpent’s craft, they desired to map their own

\textsuperscript{160} This is even more significant when one considers the fact that God began taking steps toward their redemption before they demonstrated repentance. God promised victory over the serpent in Genesis 3:15. He even clothed the man and the woman before driving them out from the garden. In other words, God began to act according to his sovereign plan without waiting for a particular human response. See “The Sovereignty of God in the Fall and its Aftermath” below.

\textsuperscript{161} Sanders, \textit{The God Who Risks}, 48.
destiny according to their own rules. Though their eyes were opened as promised (Genesis 3:5), they were opened to a reality painfully different from the one anticipated. According to Genesis 3:7, Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened to their own nakedness (Heb. ārôm). Having eating from the forbidden tree, the couple discovered they were utterly defenseless—stripped of protection and under God’s judgment. Their quest for autonomy ended with a painful reminder of their vulnerability. Here—when God’s sovereignty seems most in question—the narrative reaffirms Adam and Eve’s absolute dependence on the one from whom they rebelled.

In Genesis 3–4, humans are dependent on God for two things: (a) continued life and (b) provision of an heir through which the promise made in Genesis 3:15 will be fulfilled. First, Adam and Eve (and all who descend from them) are indebted to God for every breath taken. It was God who first breathed life into Adam and later formed Eve from the man’s rib. Later texts such as Psalm 36:9 and Proverbs 14:27 reveal that God’s providence actively sustains life after the first breath is taken. Death, for the human, is the withdrawal of God’s presence; indeed, it was Adam and Eve’s quest to separate from God that made death a part of the human experience. Human beings depend on God for each day of life; apart from his meticulous sovereignty, life itself would cease. Throughout Scripture, God is said to ordain the span of a person’s life (see Job 14:5; 21:21; Psalm 31:15; 39:4; 139:16; Acts 17:26).

Second, Adam and Eve’s hope for progeny is fulfilled only through God’s gracious sovereignty. As recorded in Genesis 4:1, Eve gave birth to Cain, saying, “‘With the help of the LORD I have brought forth a man.’” Cassuto gives an alternate translation of Eve’s declaration: “‘I have created a man equally with the Lord.’” Eve’s words, seemingly innocent, reveal a subtle defect in her thinking, soon to be corrected. Though she gives passing acknowledgement to God, Eve essentially takes credit for the birth of her son. Very

162 Waltke, Genesis, 92. See also Sailhamer, Genesis, 49. While several commentators point out the wordplay between “naked” (Heb. ārôm, Ge 2:25) and “crafty” (Heb. ārûm, Ge 3:1), Sailhamer notes with care the wordplay between “naked” (ārôm) in 3:1 and “naked” (ěrôm) in 3:7. In Genesis 3:7, a subtly different kind of nakedness is in view, compared to the nakedness of the human couple in 3:1. Though Adam and Eve were naked (and therefore vulnerable) before their sin, there was no inherent problem since they were under God’s blessing. Under God’s curse, however, the couple’s nakedness becomes a source of shame. While they sought independence from God, eating from the tree served only to bring their vulnerability to light.

163 In the previous chapter, I noted that the opening words of the creation narrative suggest that in similar fashion God has placed boundaries on all of history, providing a parallel to the boundaries God sets for each human life.
likely she remembered the promise made in Genesis 3:15, and her hopes are pinned on the child to whom she has given birth. Cassuto describes the problem as follows: “The first woman, in her joy at giving birth to her first son, boasts of her generative power, which approximates in her estimation to the Divine creative power. The Lord formed the first man… and I have formed the second man.”164

John Sailhamer notes that one of the recurring themes of Genesis is the futile effort to secure for one’s self a blessing that God alone can give.165 In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve reached for the “blessing” of autonomous knowledge. Later their descendants sought a blessing through a collective demonstration of power—the building of a great tower (Genesis 11). Abram’s wife Sarai convinced him to sleep with her maidservant in order to “expedite” God’s promised blessing of a son (Genesis 16). Genesis 4:1 is no different: Eve took it upon herself to bring about the blessing spoken of in 3:15, but her expectations were crushed when Cain was banished for murdering his younger brother (4:2-16). An important lesson was learned, however. When Eve gave birth to Seth (4:25-26), she declared, “‘God has granted me another child in the place of Abel.’” She gave to God the sole credit he deserved for the provision of her son, and it was at this time that “people began to call on the name of the Lord” (Genesis 4:26b). Despite the presence of sin, God’s sovereign purpose for human beings (that they “be fruitful and increase in number,” Genesis 1:28) advanced.

B. God’s Judgment: The “Oracles of Destiny”166

God’s response to Adam and Eve’s sin radically altered life on earth. The effects of the Fall were not simply the natural consequences of rebellion; rather, in Genesis 3:14-19 God actively prescribed the penalty for sin. To say that the consequences mentioned in this passage are described rather than prescribed is problematic for three reasons. First, such an assessment was foreign to the Hebrew mind, given its tendency to attribute everything in life

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164 Cassuto, A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, part one, 201. See also Sailhamer, Genesis, 60-61. See also Waltke, Genesis, 96. Waltke notes that the reader should expect problems with the first son, based on Eve’s presumptuous statement.

165 Sailhamer, Genesis, 60-61.

166 The term “oracles of destiny” is taken from Mathews, Genesis 1–11:26, 226.
to the hand of God.\textsuperscript{167} To speak of any phenomenon as a natural consequence unrelated to God’s providence was unthinkable.

Second, the concept of the divine curse governs our understanding of Genesis 3:14-19. In the Bible, to curse someone was to invoke God’s wrath and judgment against them. Furthermore only God could inflict a truly efficacious curse. Even if issued by a human being, its fulfillment was entirely “dependent on the divine will.”\textsuperscript{168} Since Genesis 3:14-19 employs the language of divine curse, God’s role in relation to the consequences stated cannot accurately be characterized as a passive one.\textsuperscript{169} Rather, God takes an active role in meting out punishment, determining just what the consequences of humanity’s sin will be.

Third, the manner in which God enforces the penalty of physical death suggests that his will determines the fate of humanity.\textsuperscript{170} Before the Fall, Adam and Eve enjoyed free access to the tree of life.\textsuperscript{171} After the divine pronouncement (Genesis 3:14-19, including the sentence of death in verse 19), God drove the couple from the garden and set up an angelic blockade to prevent future access to the tree of life. The narrative does not picture death as a natural phenomenon; rather, God’s actions in response to the Fall sealed the fate of humanity.

Understood properly then, the divine pronouncements are “oracles of destiny.” While open theists do not necessarily disagree with such an assessment,\textsuperscript{172} the implications of such a conclusion seem incompatible with open theism’s description of sovereignty. If the declarations in Genesis 3:14-19 are indeed “oracles of destiny,” then this means God determines the destiny of the serpent, the woman and the man, respectively. As history unfolds, things come to pass exactly as God decreed in Genesis 3: enmity characterizes the relationship between serpent and human; woman suffers pain during childbirth; and the marriage relationship—once characterized by partnership and mutual trust—is tainted by sin.

\textsuperscript{167} Hamilton, \textit{The Book of Genesis Chapters 1–17}, 201.

\textsuperscript{168} Wenham, \textit{Genesis 1–15}, 78. See also Mathews, \textit{Genesis 1–11}:26, 244.

\textsuperscript{169} In Genesis 3:14-19, the serpent (v 14) and the ground (v 17) are cursed directly.

\textsuperscript{170} See Hartley, \textit{Genesis}, 70.

\textsuperscript{171} Whether they actually ate of the tree of life during this time is irrelevant.

\textsuperscript{172} In his explanation of Genesis 3, Sanders does not explicitly state whether he believes the consequences of human sin were prescribed or described.
Also, man toils to bring food from the ground, yet he fails to elude death. Things are just as God declares them to be.

The situation is not entirely bleak, however. In the midst of divine judgment, there are signs of hope. It is to this subject we now turn.

C. God’s Promise: The Beginnings of Redemption

God’s response to Adam and Eve’s sin gave a glimpse of what the future held: It would be marred by curse and hardship, but not devoid of hope. The fact that God does not curse the man and woman directly (in contrast to the serpent) suggests that he is not through with humanity. Not even the alienation that resulted from the Fall could deter God from his sovereign plan for human beings.

More important, in his curse on the serpent, God alluded to the coming redemption:

\begin{quote}
And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.
\end{quote}

—Genesis 3:15

This verse is often referred to as the protoevangelium—that is, the “first gospel.” However, scholars do not agree whether this text should be read specifically as a messianic prophecy. Regardless, “it does suggest some hope for the future,” as John Sanders acknowledges.

At the very least, Genesis 3:15 promises victory for humans and defeat for the serpent. God declares war between the seed (Heb., zera’) of the serpent and the seed of the woman—that is, between the rebellious seed and the chosen seed. While the adversaries battle one another (the same Hebrew word describes their strikes against each other), the woman’s seed has the clear advantage. The serpent can only strike at the heel.

\begin{itemize}
\item Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis*, 57.
\item Waltke, *Genesis*, 93-94. Waltke argues convincingly that the “seed” or “offspring” of the serpent refers those members of the human race who rebel against God (cf. 1 John 1:8). The only other two possibilities of which I am aware are that the seed of the serpent refers to (a) literal snakes, reducing the text to a mere etiology or (b) demons spawned by Satan. Neither of these is supported by the context of Genesis 3:14-19. To take Genesis 3:15 as a simple etiology ignores the fact that the curse of 3:14 is against the serpent only (the humans are not likewise cursed) and that the serpent is a symbol of sin, death and the power of evil. Nor is it likely that “seed” refers to demons, since Satan is not said to father demons. The distinction between the rebellious seed and the chosen seed is discussed in greater detail below.
\end{itemize}
of the woman’s seed; meanwhile, the woman’s seed will strike the head of the serpent itself (and not merely its seed). The serpent’s demise is the anticipated fulfillment of this passage. In the previous verse, God cursed the serpent to “eat dust”—a phrase suggesting his total defeat (cf. Isaiah 65:25; Micah 7:17).

However, Genesis 3:15 is arguably not just a promise of general victory for humanity. There are, in fact, potentially messianic implications to this prophecy that should not be overlooked. As early as the third century BC, Jewish authorities interpreted the serpent as a reference to Satan and the seed of the woman as a reference to the Messiah. The New Testament authors also regarded this text as a messianic prophecy. Doubtless referring to Genesis 3:15, the Apostle Paul promised that, “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Romans 16:20). Revelation 12:9 equates the “ancient serpent” of Genesis 3 with the devil himself. And Hebrews 2:14 declares that Jesus “shared in [our] humanity” for the express purpose of destroying Satan. It should come as no surprise that the one who strikes the serpent’s head is Christ himself. There is, as Waltke notes, no possible way for a descendant of Adam, bound by sin, to deliver the fatal blow: “The woman’s offspring must be a heavenly Adam” (cf. Romans 5:12-19). While additional revelation was needed to clarify the full significance of Genesis 3:15, this passage is indeed a promise of deliverance through God’s Messiah.

God’s judgment of the serpent in Genesis 3:14-15 reveals a divine program—a carefully orchestrated plot through which God accomplishes his redemptive purpose and not merely a general plan of redemption that is at this point largely undetermined. Arguably, Genesis 3:14-15 cannot be read as some haphazard, plan-as-you-go response to the unexpected—which it might in fact be, if the Fall was unanticipated as Sanders appears to suggest. God issues his decree with full confidence; through the rest of Scripture we observe him superintending history to accomplish the purpose articulated in this early text.

As the man and woman are expelled from the garden, God’s sovereign care manifests itself once more. Genesis 3:21 records that, “the LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.” Eating the forbidden fruit had opened the couple’s eyes to their nakedness. Before the Fall, a lack of protective clothing was no problem for Adam and Eve because God himself was their protection. After the Fall, however, the human couple was defenseless and in danger of God’s judgment. Thus it is

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178 Sailhamer, *Genesis*, 55.
180 Waltke, *Genesis*, 94.
181 See Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 63. Also Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 5, 37. If one follows Pinnock’s interpretation of the Old Testament, Genesis 3:15 cannot be messianic, since the “unique role of Jesus” was not determined until Israel failed in its covenant relationship to God.
182 Such confidence that this arguably does not sound like the promise of a God who only gets some of what he wants in redemption. See Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 128-129.
no small matter that God provided clothing to cover their nakedness. God’s provision is a sign of reconciliation; with their shame covered, Adam and Eve can once again enjoy fellowship with God, though the nature of that fellowship is (temporarily) affected by sin.\footnote{Waltke, \textit{Genesis}, 95.}

Having witnessed God’s judgment and humanity’s subsequent expulsion from the garden, we begin to see the prophesied battle (cf. 3:15) unfold, starting in Genesis 4. It is a battle between two seeds—between God’s chosen seed and the rebellious seed.\footnote{See Sailhamer, \textit{Genesis}, 55.} As Waltke notes,

\begin{quote}
\textit{Humanity is now divided into two communities: the elect, who love God, and the reprobate, who love self (John 8:31-32, 44; 1 John 3:8). Each of the characters of Genesis will be either the seed of the woman that reproduces her spiritual propensity, or of the seed of the Serpent that reproduces his unbelief.}\footnote{Waltke, \textit{Genesis}, 93-94.}
\end{quote}

The history of God’s people reveals an unmistakable pattern to the composition of the chosen seed. Ancient Near Eastern custom gave preference to the firstborn in each family (cf. Deuteronomy 21:17), so one would expect—as Eve did—that the firstborn would be God’s chosen seed. Time, however, revealed that it was not so: As the Apostle John later noted, Eve’s firstborn son Cain “belonged to the evil one” (1 John 3:12)—that is, he was of the serpent’s seed. Contrary to Eve’s initial expectations, God’s promise (Genesis 3:15) extended itself through her younger son Seth, after whose birth “people began to call on the name of the \textsc{Lord}” (Genesis 4:26b). The same pattern repeats itself throughout patriarchal history: Isaac is chosen instead of Ishmael (see Genesis 17:15-16); Jacob is blessed instead of Esau (Genesis 27; cf. Romans 9:6-15); and Joseph is favored above all his older brothers (Genesis 37–50). Later, when the Israelite monarchy was established, it was the second king—himself the youngest in his family—with whom God made an everlasting covenant (see 1 Samuel 16). Such a deliberate pattern throughout Scripture testifies to the providence of God directing the composition of the chosen seed. That God would populate his seed with unexpected heroes should come as no surprise, for the Apostle Paul later revealed that,

\begin{quote}
\textit{God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.\textendash{}1 Corinthians 1:27-29}
\end{quote}

Thus, through his promise of redemption and the way in which he fulfills that promise, God maintains control of his creation. His sovereignty is not compromised by human sin; rather, it is on the heels of rebellion that redemptive history, which had its origins
“before the creation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4; cf. Hebrews 4:3, 1 Peter 1:20), is inaugurated. God, then, is not only infinitely resourceful as open theism suggests; he is infinitely sovereign. In the next chapter, we will discuss further the sovereignty of God in redemption.

XIII. The Problem of Evil

What, then, can we say about the problem of evil? How can God’s absolute, meticulous sovereignty be affirmed when elsewhere he is said to hate all kinds of evil (e.g., Isaiah 61:8 and Malachi 2:16)? Scripture never bothers with a direct answer. In his lengthy response to Job’s demand for answers (Job 38–41), God never once saw fit to explain himself. At the same time, he did not go so far as to wash his hands of the calamities that had befallen Job. Indeed, to do so would have been self-contradictory, since elsewhere God assumes responsibility for life’s disasters (see Isaiah 45:7, for example). In Job’s case, Satan could not have afflicted him apart from God’s permission to do so (Job 1:6-12; 2:1-7). Likewise, the work of Satan was constrained by the restrictions that God imposed (Job 1:12; 2:6).

There are, in fact, two equally important but (on the surface) contradictory truths embraced in Scripture: the unequivocal repugnance of evil and the absolute sovereignty of God. Open theism has erred in its emphasis on evil’s repugnance at the expense of God’s sovereignty. Conventional theism is susceptible to the opposite extreme: emphasizing the sovereignty of God to the point of resignation or indifference with respect to evil. Scripture, by contrast, embraces both truths with unwavering conviction. On the one hand,

*Scripture never tires of denouncing the reality and the danger of evil: it is evil totally, radically and absolutely. Respectable non-Christians grow weary or irritated at such insistence, from the third page to the very final page of the Bible... No biblical material, studied with care, allows us to retreat from the denunciation of malignity.*

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On the other hand,

*Scripture never doubts God’s command over every event, or that he determines everything that happens, in its entirety and in minutest detail: God is sovereign totally, radically, absolutely.*

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One need not search long to find scriptural evidence that God’s sovereignty extends over “evils, calamities and transgressions.” As already noted, God freely admits to creating disaster (Isaiah 45:7; cf. Amos 3:6). God hardens hearts (Exodus 4:21; cf. Romans 9:18), inflicts death (1 Samuel 2:25) and even deceives false prophets (Ezekiel 4:7-9). In fact, it is difficult to conceive of God being sovereign at all if he were not so with respect to the evils of this world; otherwise, what would be left in this world over which God could exercise sovereignty?\(^\text{188}\)

Yet the prophet Habakkuk—upon learning to his horror that God planned to deliver Judah into the hands of idolatrous Babylon—rightly confessed that God is one whose “eyes are too pure to look on evil” (Habakkuk 1:13). The apostle James forbade Christians to blame God for their temptations (James 1:13). God resolutely denounces all efforts to impugn him for presence of evil.

In making an initial step toward a suitable explanation (a fuller discussion of theodicy is beyond the scope of this paper), four things should be remembered. First, as theologian Henri Blocher notes, to the degree that evil is inflicted as a form of punishment, it is good.\(^\text{189}\) God is fully justified in bringing calamity on rebellious sinners while still remaining “too pure to look on evil,” since such calamity is a satisfaction of his demand for justice. Quoting Blocher once more,

\[\text{The Lord has made everything for its own purpose, even the wicked for the day of disaster, that he may serve as the rod of God’s wrath on the day of punishment [see Proverbs 16:4]. In so much as it is a work of wickedness, the act committed is evil; but in that it is the execution of justice, the event brings forth good.}\(^\text{190}\)

Second, we must carefully maintain the biblical distinction between God’s sovereign (prescriptive) will and his moral (descriptive) will.\(^\text{191}\) God has provided a set of moral guidelines to which humankind is held accountable. However, the scriptures cited in the above discussion of God’s sovereignty over evil give compelling evidence that God, in his

\(^{188}\) Ibid., 94.

\(^{189}\) Ibid., 87-88, 98.

\(^{190}\) Ibid., 88.

\(^{191}\) See the above excursus for a more detailed discussion of the distinction between God’s sovereign will and his moral will.
sovereign plan, often moves people to act in ways that are contrary to his moral will. This should come as no surprise, since we learn in Acts that the crucifixion—an atrocity if ever there were one—was ordained by God (Acts 2:23).

Third, one should maintain a distinction between primary and secondary causality. (Open theism might argue against such a distinction, suggesting that secondary causality is essentially no different than primary causality.) The primary cause of sin resides within creation, not in God. In Genesis 3, God is not the tempter; the serpent is. Job 1–2 is instructive on this point. The opening narrative of Job is unmistakably clear about who bears the responsibility for Job’s calamity: Satan (Job 1:12-13ff; 2:7-8ff). Yet in both cases, Satan is powerless to act independent of God’s decree. In Job 1:11 he demands that God stretch out his hand against Job; in response God says, “Very well, then, everything he has is in your hands” (1:12, emphasis added). As Martin Luther wisely commented, the devil, though evil, remains “God’s devil.”

Finally, we must remember and believe that God orchestrates the affairs of this world—including that which is unpleasant or evil—according to a purpose that is supremely good. The road that leads to God’s purposes, however, is neither short nor smooth. In the garden of Eden, for example, God deliberately staged the creation of humanity in two parts (see the second creation narrative, Genesis 2:4-25). God did not create Adam’s ideal companion right away; Eve’s creation did not even follow immediately his decree to make a partner for the man (see 2:18). Rather, as John Sanders correctly argues, God put off Eve’s creation until Adam realized his need for a partner. One might think Genesis 2:18-25 would be an inviting proof text for open theists who wish to argue that God comes to know things of which he previously had no knowledge and then alters his plans accordingly. However, Sanders—to his credit—offers no such interpretation. Instead he reads this text as a demonstration of divine wisdom with respect to the manner in which God created the man and woman. God in his sovereignty orchestrated events in order to make the man aware of his need—a need the man could not have fulfilled for himself. (Nor could he fulfill this need

192 Note that God did not endeavor to find a partner among the animals of creation, suggesting that what followed in Genesis 2:19-20 was for the man’s benefit, not God’s.
anywhere else in creation.) Once God’s point was made (Genesis 2:19-20), he “worked to fill [Adam’s need].”

Is it, then, at least possible to conceive of God using events in Genesis 3 to remind humanity of its absolute dependence on him, similar to how he taught Adam in 2:18-25? Through the disaster that unfolded in Genesis 3, humanity came face to face with its naked vulnerability; the moment Adam and Eve reached for their independence they found that life could not be had apart from the sustaining grace of God. The very means of redemption—available to us only by God’s grace—reaffirm that human beings can do nothing apart from God (cf. John 15:5). While such speculation should be held loosely—especially where the text gives no explicit answer—it is at least conceivable that God through the Fall (and through the rest of redemptive history) became humanity’s Teacher.

XIV. Conclusion

In this chapter we have studied the Fall narrative both in its immediate context and in the broader context of Scripture’s teaching on sin and evil. In both cases, there is no compelling evidence that God’s meticulous sovereignty is suspended due to humanity’s sin. Rather, God maintains control in spite of humanity’s sin, orchestrating the events of Genesis 3 and subsequent chapters according to a plan that we are told has its origins “before the creation of the world.” Such a God can be nothing less than absolutely sovereign.

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193 Sanders, The God Who Risks, 44.
The Fall was a disaster of unthinkable magnitude. God’s sovereignty is not compromised by human sin, but this by no means mitigates the devastating impact sin has on creation. The whole earth is affected by God’s curse, and the chapters that follow Genesis 3 reveal the full extent of infralapsarian depravity. God responds to the Fall by announcing his redemptive program; in Genesis 3:15, he sets the stage for a great battle between the chosen seed and the serpent’s seed. However mysterious the language of this passage, one thing seems clear: The outcome of the struggle is certain, at least in God’s mind.

How should we understand God’s sovereignty when we read the redemptive narratives in Scripture? Everything following Genesis 3 can arguably be classified as redemption narrative; because of their sheer weight, these texts have enormous implications for our understanding of God’s sovereignty. Is the redemptive God one who lovingly responds as best he can to human sin, or is he a divine author weaving together an intricate story of salvation to correspond perfectly to his will?

XV. Open Theism and Redemption

For open theism, redemptive history consists of “divine goals with open routes.” Redemption is God’s project—his purpose for creation after the Fall. But it is not a blueprint outlining every detail of divine activity. Since God has “sovereignly decided to make some of his actions contingent on our requests and actions,” there are simply too many variables to which God must respond, casting doubt on the description of redemption as a thoroughly scripted affair.

Because at least some of God’s actions are contingent upon human action, God requires creaturely cooperation for the successful implementation of his redemptive purposes. To the extent that human beings refuse to cooperate with God, his redemptive will is foiled. For example, every sinner who rejects God’s offer of salvation lessens the success

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of the redemptive plan. Thus the extent to which God’s redemptive efforts on our behalf will succeed remains to be seen. John Sanders summarizes his view of redemption as follows:

God is still working [after the Fall] for the best interests of the humans, and these divine actions may be understood as attempts to restore their trust in the divine wisdom and provision. Is God a fool? Will his attempts at restoration succeed? Only the history of God’s activity and the human response to it will tell.

For Sanders and other open theists, the success of God’s initiative does not appear to be a foregone conclusion. In fact, God’s early efforts at reconciliation with humanity ended in failure, according to Sanders: “Despite God’s continued efforts to work with his creatures, sin becomes ever more pervasive.” As the biblical narrative progresses, God gets some—but not all—of what he wants. How much of God’s redemptive plan will come to fruition is not known, though Sanders offers hope of at least a partial victory:

Although God is not succeeding with everyone, the biblical witness is clear that God has made substantial progress in building a people of whom he is proud... We have reason to hope in the Spirit, for the work of the Spirit is not yet done and the way into the future is not closed and sealed... Though the Spirit may not get everything he desires, we have reason to hope because we have a God with a proven track record of successfully navigating the vicissitudes of human history and redeeming it... God has achieved some of what he wants, but much more remains to be accomplished.

More will be said about the particulars of open theism’s view of redemption as we progress through the relevant narratives. For now, it is sufficient to summarize open theism’s view of redemption as a general plan by which God works—to varying degrees of success—in order to reconcile people unto himself.

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198 In addition to Sanders’ comments quoted above, see also Richard Rice’s discussion of Jesus’ wilderness temptation in “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” 44.

199 Ibid.

200 Ibid., 128-129.
XVI. Preliminary Considerations

The task of this chapter is to review some of the major redemptive narratives in order to discern how they inform our understanding of divine sovereignty. Because of the limited scope of this undertaking, it is impossible to consider each such narrative in Scripture. Therefore, I will focus mainly on those narratives discussed in the literature of open theism. Sanders in particular addresses every one of the narratives considered below except one (Jacob and Esau). Therefore much of what follows will interact specifically with his two chapters on biblical narrative in The God Who Risks.\(^{201}\)

XVII. Redemption Narratives of the Old Testament

Redemption in the Old Testament can be understood two possible ways. A conventional theist might argue that the Old Testament narratives point to Christ, laying the groundwork for the saving work accomplished in the New Testament. Open theism, by contrast, describes Old Testament redemption as a largely unsuccessful initiative: The failure of God’s efforts in the Old Testament resulted in his measures taken in the New Testament, including the incarnation of Christ.\(^{202}\) Clark Pinnock writes, “Indeed the whole nation of Israel failed in its covenant relationship with God according to the prophets. This required a new initiative on God’s part and led to the unique role of Jesus.”\(^{203}\) Similarly, John Sanders suggests, “Sometimes God’s plans do not bring about the desired result and must be judged a failure. The [Old Testament] covenant history records many disasters and setbacks for God.”\(^{204}\)

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\(^{201}\) Chaps. 3-4.

\(^{202}\) On this issue, open theism bears a striking resemblance to traditional dispensationalism. See Stanley D. Toussaint, “Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist” in Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism, (Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed.; Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1999), 227-252. Traditional dispensationalists have long argued that it is only “because of Israel’s negative response [that] God is now working with the church, distinct from Israel” (p. 249). Toussaint, claiming that the “church…is never prophesied in the Old Testament,” argues that the “coming of the kingdom was contingent upon [Israel’s] response” (p. 249). Likewise, for open theism, the specific role of the incarnated Messiah was contingent upon Israel’s response to the covenant. Had Israel remained faithful to the covenant, redemptive history would have taken a drastically different course, according to Clark Pinnock. Thus both traditional dispensationalism and open theism allow for God’s original, sovereign purposes to be thwarted by human rejection.

\(^{203}\) Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 37.
Through my discussion of the narratives that follow, I hope to demonstrate the following: (1) some potential problems with open theism’s understanding of redemption in the Old Testament and (2) indicators of God’s sovereign will guiding the course of Old Testament redemption according to his perfect plan.

A. Noah

In the epilogue to Genesis 5:1-32, the narrator makes known what has become of humanity since the Fall. Genesis 5 reveals that human beings have procreated, fulfilling God’s creation mandate (1:28). However, all is not well. Humanity’s sinfulness has only grown with its population: “When human beings began to increase… The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become” (6:1, 5). Genesis 6:1-8, with its judgment against the human race, teaches that more than just procreation is necessary for survival; obedience to God’s moral will is required.

Open theism’s assessment of Genesis 6:1-8 is that creation has “miscarried.” Because of human sin, God experiences the “pain of rejection,” according to Sanders. Stunned with grief, God wishes he never created human beings and consequently announces his decision to “wipe [them] from the face of the earth” (6:6-7). God contemplates giving up on his entire creation until he discovers Noah—a man “in whom he [can] take pride.” As a result of this discovery, God changes course. By sparing Noah’s family, he relents somewhat from his plan of destruction: “Consequently, God does not give up hope and will continue his project…”

Open theism’s interpretation of the Flood narrative is at least partially correct. Taken as a whole, the narrative appears to affirm both God’s personal nature and his sovereignty.

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205 Genesis 6:1-8 is the epilogue to chapter five. Genesis 6:9 starts a new account (toledot).
over creation. The overall pattern of the Flood story is summarized in Genesis 6:5-8: (1) God sees, (2) God feels, and (3) God acts.\textsuperscript{210}

First, God “sees” humanity’s dreadful condition (6:5, cf. 12). Victor Hamilton notes that the Hebrew term used in 6:5 frequently denotes surprise (cf. Genesis 8:13; 18:2; 19:28; 22:13; 24:63; 26:8; 29:2; 31:2; 10; 33:1; 37:25; 40:6; 42:27). On this basis he suggests the possibility that “the earth’s contamination caught [God] by surprise.”\textsuperscript{211} Such a view, which might find support among open theists,\textsuperscript{212} seems unlikely for two reasons. First, none of the above passages have God as their subject; they all describe what human beings “saw.” Second, the phrase in question does not always imply surprise—divine or human. Hamilton notes that Genesis 1:31, which does have God as its subject, lacks such a nuance. Also, according to Genesis 30:1, “Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children,” after having been barren for some time (see 29:31-35). Likewise, Joseph’s brothers “saw” (50:15) that their father was dead after they had buried him in Canaan (50:12-14). Neither Rachel nor Joseph’s brothers “saw” something they did not already know; rather, they appear to have observed or contemplated something of which they are already aware.

The phrase “God saw,” rather, indicates judgment based on divine observation.\textsuperscript{213} The author plays off 6:2, where “the sons of God saw that these daughters were beautiful.” What the “sons of God” see leads to wickedness; by contrast, what God sees leads to righteous judgment. Therefore the phrase “God saw” anticipates his coming intervention.\textsuperscript{214} (Cf. Exodus 2:25, where God sees the plight of the Hebrews before intervening as he promised to do in Genesis 15:14-16.) Thus, God’s “seeing” is inexorably connected to his sovereign activity.


\textsuperscript{211} \textit{Ibid.}, 278.


Second, God *feels* genuine grief in response to what he “sees” (Genesis 6:6). Open theism has made much of the suffering of God, lamenting conventional theism’s perceived tendency to dismiss scriptural statements about God’s suffering as anthropopathisms. On the one hand, open theism’s description of God’s emotional suffering is a helpful contribution to our understanding of God. It is virtually impossible to avoid the implications of Genesis 6:6. God is significantly affected by the developments described in the preceding verse. The language of 6:6 suggests pain mixed with rage—perhaps the most intense form of negative emotion possible. While God’s grief is not identical to human grief, to say that the description of God’s emotions in 6:6 is a mere anthropopathism would rob the text of its meaning. As Mathews writes, “God is no robot. We know him as a personal, living God, not as a static principle, who while having transcendent purposes to be sure also engages with his creation. Our God is incomparably affected by, even pained by, the sinner’s rebellion.”

On the other hand, the experience of such intense emotion is not antithetical to the concept of meticulous sovereignty. In this context, the term translated “grieved” (NIV, *yinnahem*) refers to a change in God’s *emotional* state, not to a change in his course of action. While *yinnahem* is sometimes translated “relent,” such a meaning is arguably not in view here. The only case in which *yinnahem* clearly describes a divine change of action is

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215 Terrence Fretheim’s *The Suffering of God* is one of the most oft-cited books in Sanders’ *The God Who Risks*.


217 I do not make very many concessions to open theism in this paper, but this is certainly one of them.


219 If anything, God (as the ultimate perfect being) experiences emotion more perfectly than finite humans.


221 Bruce Ware has argued that a transcendent, sovereign God can still experience “appropriate emotions” as things occur in real time. See Bruce Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2000), 91-92.

222 Nor would it be wise to argue that both *grieve* and *relent* are in view in this occurrence of *yinnahem*. It is a linguistic fallacy to import all the possible meanings of a word into a single occurrence of that word. Just because *yinnahem* describes a change in God’s course of action elsewhere in Scripture does not automatically mean such an interpretation should be taken in this context. In fact, as noted above, the context indicates that this is *not* the case, since God is not described as relenting from a specific course of action. The
when God is said to relent from a punishment he had previously threatened (see Exodus 32:12, 14; Amos 7:3, 6). In Genesis 6:6, God does not relent from punishing sin; rather, he prepares to inflict judgment. Nor has God completely changed his mind about having created humanity, since he actively works to preserve the human race through Noah’s seed (6:8).

Finally, the parallel to yinnahem in the latter half of verse six—“and his heart was filled with pain”—adds weight to the view that yinnahem identifies God’s emotional reaction to human sin. The point of Genesis 6:6 is that God’s creation of humanity caused him grief—not because his decision to create was a mistake—but because humanity had transgressed his moral will.

Third, God acts on the basis of what he saw. God does three things specifically in response to his observation of human affairs (6:1-8). First, God declares that from now on, “[humanity’s] days will be a hundred and twenty years.” Second, God announces the destruction of his creation by deluge. Third, God acts to preserve a remnant of humanity through Noah.

With respect to God’s first act, the decree to limit humanity’s days may be an example of God’s meticulous sovereignty. Various interpretations of this passage have been offered, but it is plausible to suggest that God’s intent was to place a new limit on the length of human life. God revealed his plan to withdraw his spirit of life from humanity, shortening the maximum lifespan to 120 years. The rest of the Pentateuch seems to confirm the gradual fulfillment of this decree. Prior to Genesis 6, the average recorded

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223 Ibid., 341-343. See also “Did God relent?” in the previous chapter.

224 Mathews, Genesis 1–11:26, 343. See Appendix 1 for the distinction between God’s sovereign and moral will.

225 Admittedly, this occurs prior to the “see/feel/act” motif of 6:5-8.

226 The two primary options are (1) 120 years refers to the time that will elapse between the decree and the onset of judgment and (2) 120 years refers to the maximum lifespan after God’s judgment. A detailed survey of the interpretive issues is not possible here.

lifespan was 851 years. Following Genesis 6, the average lifespan plummeted to 225 years. While Noah lived to be 950 years old, his son Shem (who lived the majority of his life after the Flood) died at nearly half that age. Notably, Moses—the last person whose death is recorded in the Pentateuch—died when he was exactly 120 years old. Deuteronomy 34:7 reveals that Moses died in spite of his good health, which may suggest that his death was by divine appointment (cf. Numbers 20:12). Could it be that it is God who determines the number of our days (cf., Job 14:5; 21:21; Psalm 31:15; 39:4; 139:16; Acts 13:36)?

With respect to the promised deluge (6:7; elaborated on, 13ff), judgment is entirely at God’s initiative. God initiated and accomplished the promised judgment (and redemption) according to his word. In so doing he demonstrates his power over nature.

With respect to God’s faithful preservation of a remnant, this too is at his initiative. In Genesis 6:8, Noah finds favor in God’s eyes. Victor Hamilton tries to distinguish finding God’s favor from the concept of winning favor. To be sure, Noah’s finding favor is not unrelated to his righteousness (mentioned in 6:9); but even so, as Mathews notes, “The proper emphasis in our passage is God’s gracious favor, just as we see his preservation of the human family in [Genesis 1–11] despite human sin. For the apostle Paul the promissory favor is realized by faith, hence a gift (grace) that results in righteousness (Romans 4:13-16).” If Genesis 6:8 teaches that Noah found favor by God’s grace, is the best interpretation of the text that which suggests God is bent on humanity’s total destruction until he (unexpectedly) finds a righteous man worth saving? Besides, if Noah found favor with God because of his righteousness (6:9), then arguably a God with present knowledge would have been aware of Noah’s righteousness even as he grieved over humanity’s sin and plotted judgment (6:6-7). Even without future knowledge he could have ordained Noah’s deliverance while planning humanity’s destruction. Thus Sanders’ conclusion that God changed course when he came upon Noah seems unlikely. Rather, the events of Genesis 6ff—both judgment and salvation—appear to develop according to God’s unchanging plan.

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228 896 years if the two extreme variables, Enoch and Methuselah, are removed.

229 Ibid., 276. Hamilton writes, “The phrase ‘find favor in one’s eyes’ occurs a number of times in Genesis with a wealth of nuances that cannot be captured by one English equivalent.” Among the possible nuances are to beg one’s favor, to be indulged, and to gain (or win) one’s favor.

There are additional indicators that the Flood narrative progresses according to God’s sovereign will. First, Noah is commended twice for having done everything God commanded (6:22; 7:5). Second, when the time came to board the ark, God himself closed the door behind Noah and his family (7:16), symbolizing God’s protective power. Finally, at the climax of the Flood narrative, God “remembered” Noah (8:1). This remembrance does not suggest that God had previously forgotten his friend in the ark; rather, Scripture uses the language of remembrance to signal when God is about to act on a promise. In Genesis 6:18, God promised to establish his covenant with Noah. In chapter eight, God brought an end to his judgment, clearing the way for the fulfillment of this promise.

In summary, the Flood narrative gives one of the most poignant pictures of God’s genuine emotion in all of Scripture. At the same time, God is represented as the one who orchestrates the events of the narrative—both the terrible deluge and Noah’s deliverance from it. This narrative, then, does not appear to be inconsistent with the concept of God’s meticulous sovereignty.

B. Abraham

In his interpretation of the Abrahamic narrative, John Sanders focuses especially on the interaction between Abraham and God. Through mutual dialogue, the two learn to trust one another, according to Sanders. Abraham boldly challenges God (15:2-3), compelling him to make good on his promise (15:1; cf. 12:1-3). God, in turn, tests Abraham (22:1-19) in order to find out whether Abraham is “the sort of person on whom God can count.”

The Abrahamic narrative inaugurates patriarchal history—a history seemingly characterized by God’s careful superintendence. Indeed, the starting point of the narrative is God’s sovereign call of Abraham (12:1ff). Given the overall context—the call comes shortly after the rebellion and subsequent scattering of the nations at Babel (11:1-9)—God’s election of Abraham is perhaps best understood as an act of grace. It is “God’s gift of salvation in the midst of judgment.” God chose Abraham instead of others who might have been more

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231 Mathews, Genesis 1–11:26, 378.


233 Sailhamer, Genesis, 111.
qualified for the task. Indeed, it is quite possible that in commanding Abraham to leave both country and household (12:1) that God called Abraham out from a pagan heritage—in which case Abraham was elected specifically unto salvation.

What amazes Walter Brueggemann, himself an open theist, is that God extends the call and the corresponding promise of a great nation to a barren couple (cf. 11:30). In this context it remains for God’s spoken word (his promise) to overcome the couple’s barrenness. In the end, Abraham and Sarah’s futility is no obstacle to God’s sovereign plan. Brueggemann writes:

*The speech of God has its way over the barrenness:* The Lord said (12:1). The speech of God is at the same time imperative and promise, summons and assurance. The barren one is moved and comes to life... The speech of God brings people to a faithful response, people who heretofore had no capacity for any response (emphasis added).

God’s superintendence of history may also be seen in his detailed prediction of Israel’s sufferings (Genesis 15:12-16). While Sanders suggests that, “God does not speak here with precision,” such a conclusion seems unnaturally forced on the text by the presupposition that God cannot know the future with exhaustive certainty. The forewarning of Genesis 15:12-16 seems clear. God advised Abraham to know that the following things were “for certain”:

- Abraham’s descendents will dwell in a foreign country (cf. Genesis 47-50)
- They will be enslaved and mistreated there (cf. Exodus 1; 5:6-21)
- Their suffering will last approximately 400 years (cf. Exodus 12:40-41)

234 Waltke notes that there were doubtless other righteous people of the time. Waltke, *Genesis*, 204. Indeed, Genesis 12:1 makes no comment on Abraham’s moral state at the time he was called.

235 I believe there are two reasons it is likely Abraham was a pagan when God called him. First, unlike Noah, Abraham is not described as “righteous” or “blameless” when he is chosen by God. Second, Abraham’s family worshipped idols, as evidenced by his relative Laban, who possessed household gods (stolen by his daughter Rachel in Genesis 31:19).


239 The fact that verse 16 refers to the “fourth generation” as the terminus of this period indicates that four hundred years is a round number.
• **God will punish the oppressor nation for its cruelty (cf. Exodus 7:14–12:30)**

• **Abraham’s descendents will be delivered from the yoke of the oppressor nation (cf. Exodus 12:31-42)**

• **Abraham’s descendents will leave the oppressor nation with great possessions (cf. Exodus 12:35-36)**

God’s promise to Abraham was fulfilled in every detail. There does not appear to be much room for ambiguity in what is said in chapter 15. One commentator has suggested Abraham may have even known to which country God was referring in 15:13: Given his own sojourn to Egypt, it is plausible that Abraham assumed Egypt was the unnamed country. In short, Genesis 15:12-16 seems to allow but two possibilities: Either God saw through time and knew what would happen to Israel, in which case he possesses future knowledge; or God ordained Israel’s suffering as a part of redemptive history. Either way, Genesis 15:12-16 presents a challenge to open theism. If the former is true, then God has a form of knowledge which open theism generally rejects. If the latter is true, then God is in some sense sovereign over human suffering. Furthermore, the ability to orchestrate (1) Israel’s journey into a foreign land, (2) that land’s oppression of the Hebrews and (3) the miraculous deliverance of God’s people, suggests a willingness on God’s part to ordain a number of human choices necessary in order for things to come to pass as God said they would.

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240 Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1 –17*, 435. Bruce Waltke’s commentary identifies several parallels between Abraham’s exodus from Egypt and Israel’s. The two share the following in common:

- God sends a famine (Gen. 12:10; 47:4); the Egyptians afflict them (12:12-15; Ex. 1:11-14);
- God plagues the Egyptians (Gen. 12:17; Ex. 7:14-12:30); the Egyptians let them go with great wealth (Gen. 12:16, 20; Ex. 12:33-36); they return to the land by stages through the wilderness (Gen 13:3; Ex. 17:1); and finally arrive back in the land where they worship the Lord (Gen. 13:3-4; Ex. 15:17; see also Ps. 105:14-15; 1 Cor. 10:1-4). (Genesis, 217)

Are these parallels to be attributed to chance? If God is not responsible for the uncanny parallels between these two histories, then who is?

241 The latter interpretation could be accepted by open theists, though they would argue vigorously that this is a specialized case that ought not be turned into a generalized principle—i.e., just because God foreordained this one aspect of history does not mean he determines all of history. Nonetheless open theism has not freed itself from difficulty. Open theism seeks to get God “off the hook” for evil, yet here is a passage in which the oppression of the Hebrews is explicitly ascribed to the hand of God. (Unless one takes the view that God was simply describing—not prescribing—what would happen, in which case one must affirm future knowledge as a necessary part of omniscience.)
God seals his covenant in Genesis 15 with absolute solemnity. Comparing 15:17-18 with other ancient Near Eastern texts (also Jeremiah 34:18), Bruce Waltke concludes that God, in effect, pronounces a curse on himself in the event that he breaks covenant with Abraham: “Once the animal was killed, the one making the covenant could expect the same fate as the animal if he broke the covenant.”\(^{242}\) In other words, God’s covenant with Abraham is inviolable. This is noteworthy, in light of John Sanders’ suggestion that God in Genesis 22 tests Abraham in order to **find out** whether Abraham can be trusted to be a faithful covenant partner.\(^{243}\) How can the test be for God’s benefit if God has irrevocably bound himself to Abraham already—and in so doing has made some very detailed promises to him? God could not benefit from the test if his dealings with Abraham were already written in stone; so it seems the test is more likely for Abraham’s benefit.

Similarly, it was perhaps for Abraham’s benefit that God revealed his judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah—a possibility arguably suggested by the preceding deliberation (18:17-18) whereby God indicates his intent to make Abraham privy to his plans.\(^{244}\) In view of Abraham’s successful effort to bargain with God on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, open theism might argue that God’s sovereign plans are open to significant alteration. As noted in the previous chapter, however, such a conclusion is problematic because it seems to demand that one of the following be true in this case: (1) God genuinely intended to destroy the righteous along with the wicked, (2) God did not care if the righteous perished with the wicked, or (3) God did not realize he might destroy the righteous with the wicked. Any of the above options is problematic, since we are left with either an unjust, uncaring or incompetent God.\(^{245}\)

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\(^{242}\) Waltke, *Genesis*, 245.

\(^{243}\) See “The implausibility of an implausible Fall” in chapter two.

\(^{244}\) Waltke argues that God invited Abraham to dialogue in order to “challenge [Abraham] to act wisely and nobly for justice.] While this interpretative is perhaps a bit speculative, it makes sense, in light of the alternative interpretation. If Abraham genuinely changes God’s mind through the dialogue of 18:20-33, then what can be concluded but that God lacked a concern for compassion and justice until Abraham demanded it of him? See Waltke, *Genesis*, 268-270. Cf. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 53-54.

\(^{245}\) See chapter three, “Human Sin and the Problem of Evil,” fn. 67.
As the narrative unfolds, Abraham and Sarah learn that it is God alone who provides the promised blessing (cf. Romans 9:16). Of their efforts to produce an heir through Hagar their maidservant (Genesis 16), Sanders suggests there was nothing inherently wrong:

*Some interpret this maneuver as a lack of faith on the part of Abraham and Sarah, who scheme instead of waiting on divine providence. But this reflects a misunderstanding of how providence works. God has not told them through whom the child will come, so why should they not use the brains God gave them?*

Indeed, Sarah’s actions reflected a social custom that was validated by ancient Near Eastern law codes. However, for two reasons it does not seem likely that the narrator shares his culture’s approval of Sarah’s scheme. First, according to Scripture, monogamy was always the norm for human sexual relationships (see Genesis 2:23-24). To suggest Abraham and Sarah did nothing wrong in Genesis 16 implies either that the rules did not apply to them or that God changed the rules, in which case we might say that God’s moral character is subject to change (something open theism appropriately rejects). Second, Eve’s story in Genesis 4 provides a helpful parallel when interpreting Genesis 16. Both Eve and Sarah sought to provide an heir by their own means (4:1; 16:1-2). Both efforts proved futile (4:2-24; 16:4-6; 17:17-22). When the promised heir finally came, it was by the hand of God, not by the scheming efforts of human beings (4:25; 18:10; 21:1-7). From the initial call (12:1) to the provision of the promised heir (21:1), Abraham’s role in redemptive history seems to be directed by the sovereign hand of God.

### C. Jacob and Esau

In *The God Who Risks*, John Sanders passes over the story of Jacob and Esau without comment. Their story has significant implications for the study of God’s sovereignty, which merit consideration here. Genesis 25 describes Rebekah’s difficult pregnancy as her unborn children “struggled…within her” (25:22). Her quest for an explanation resulted in the following message from God:

> “Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; one people shall be stronger than the other,”

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the elder shall serve the younger.”
—Genesis 25:23

That the younger is favored should come as no surprise. Already Abel and Seth have
been favored over Cain, and Isaac has been chosen instead of Ishmael. This pattern of
annulling primogeniture rights continued following the story of Jacob and Esau as well.248
What is significant is that this state of affairs is said to have been brought about by God’s
own sovereign choice (cf. Malachi 1:2-3). Before Esau was born or even capable of
exercising a choice in the matter, he was apparently destined to forfeit the promised blessing
to his younger brother. Drawing on this text, Paul defends the election of Gentiles as heirs to
a promise once thought reserved exclusively for Abraham’s biological descendents (Romans

In the case of Jacob and Esau, God’s exercise of meticulous sovereignty poses a
challenge to open theism’s understanding of human free will. For God to decree that the
blessing would come through Jacob, it can be argued that God had to superintend Esau’s
decision to trade his birthright for a bowl of stew (Genesis 25:27-34). Admittedly, those who
believe God can superintend as much of history as he pleases (e.g., Gregory Boyd, Clark
Pinnock, etc.), do not consider this a problem. However, one must ask: How is it just for a
God who values autonomous human freedom as necessary for meaningful relationships to
overrule that freedom in the lives of select individuals (e.g., Esau, Judas) for the sake of
accomplishing his sovereign purposes? If autonomous free will is an essential part of what it
means to be human, has God not robbed Esau, and Judas, and even Jesus (whose redemptive
role was foreordained; see Acts 2:23) of their humanity in order to get what he wants
(assuming we must choose between human freedom and divine sovereignty)? Perhaps the
best answer is to accept the paradox of being free agents, yet clay in the potter’s hands
(Jeremiah 18:5-6; cf. Romans 9:19-29).

248 For additional example, see Victor Hamilton, The Book of Genesis Chapters 18–50, The New
International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 177
**D. Joseph and His Brothers**

John Sanders has rightly noted that the story of Joseph often “serves as the paradigm in discussions of providence.”\(^{249}\) To his credit, Sanders acknowledges the possibility of what he calls a “risk-free” reading of the Joseph narrative; however he does not take such an interpretation himself.\(^{250}\) Sanders attempts to explain Joseph’s claim that God “sent” him to Egypt (Genesis 45:5-9; cf. 50:19-20) in terms of what he believes this statement does not mean:

*It is the glory of God to be able to bring good out of evil human action. But nothing in the texts demands the interpretation that God actually desired the sinful acts. The text does not say that God caused or necessitated the events. In fact, the text is remarkably silent regarding any divine activity until Joseph’s speeches [Genesis 45:5-9; 50:19-21].*\(^{251}\)

Sanders’ argument is twofold. First, because God is not the author of evil, he could not have sovereignly ordained Joseph’s brothers’ decision to sell Joseph into slavery (which ultimately paved the way for the entire family’s survival). Second, God is, in Sanders’ words, “absent from the text.” To be sure, God worked behind the scenes in an attempt to make something good out of the brothers’ evil deed; but he did not act as the meticulously sovereign author of history.\(^{252}\)

Neither of Sanders’ arguments is free of difficulty. In arguing that God could not have ordained the events of Genesis 37–50 because he never “desired the sinful acts” of Joseph’s brothers, Sanders fails to consider the possibility of a distinction between God’s moral will and sovereign will (see Appendix 1: Concept Study of God’s Will). It was not unheard of for God to ordain the ruthless aggression of pagan nations in order to punish his people (e.g., Habakkuk 1:1–2:20) or to harden hearts in order to reveal his might (e.g., Exodus 3:19-20; 4:21-23; see below). God clearly hated the evil that was done, as indicated by his promise to Habakkuk that he would later punish the very nation (Babylon) he sent

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\(^{250}\) Ibid.

\(^{251}\) Ibid., 55.

\(^{252}\) Ibid.
against Judah (2:2-20, esp. vv.8-9). Yet the Babylonians’ wickedness served God’s sovereign purpose (1:5-6).

Second, Sanders’ assumption that “God is absent from the text” does not seem to do justice to the role God plays in the narrative. It should be noted that the outcome of the story was foreshadowed in Genesis 37, when Joseph twice dreamed that his family would bow down to him. In the ancient Near East, the origin of such dreams was thought to be divine; and there is little doubt that Joseph’s father and brothers fully understood the significance of Joseph’s dreams (see Genesis 37:8, 10-11). Notably, those dreams were fulfilled as a direct result of Joseph’s being sold into slavery: His brothers bowed to him on three separate occasions (Genesis 42:6; 43:26, 28; 50:18); they were forced to place their lives into Joseph’s hands as famine gripped the whole region.

Furthermore, God’s active sovereignty can be seen throughout the events that led to the fulfillment of Joseph’s dreams. As Bruce Waltke comments, “The theological narrative credits God with all of Joseph’s advancements. [God] controls Joseph’s future.” Because the LORD is with him, Joseph prospers in Potiphar’s service (39:2-6a). Even in prison God remains the driving force behind Joseph’s success (39:21-23). Later God gives Joseph the ability to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams (41:16). The message of these dreams is that God has ordained seven years of abundance followed by seven years of famine (41:28-32). That both the abundance and famine come from God’s own hand is not doubted: “God has shown Pharaoh what he is about to do… The matter has been firmly decided by God, and God will do it soon” (41:28, 32). The divinely ordained famine, which affected the entire region (41:57), drove Joseph’s brothers to Egypt in search of food.

But what are we to say about Joseph’s misfortune that first led to his servitude in Egypt? Joseph, speaking to his brothers, provides the answer in Genesis 45:

*And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life… God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant*

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254 Ibid., 522.

255 This famine doubtless caused many people to starve to death. What implications might this have for theodicy?
on earth and you keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.

—Genesis 45:5, 7-8a

Sanders, asking the above question, dismisses Joseph’s statement, noting that in Genesis 43:23 Joseph “says that God gave the money back to his brothers even though Joseph admits that he had the money put in their sacks.” Sanders’ explanation fails to satisfy for a number of reasons. First, it is not Joseph who speaks in 43:23; it is his steward who makes this claim to the brothers (see 43:19-23). Second, the context of 43:23 appears different from that of 45:5-7. In Genesis 45, Joseph is not speaking of his own actions, but those of his brothers. By contrast, Genesis 43 attributes to God something for which Joseph was directly responsible. The circumstances governing the two events are different; therefore, just because one might have been inaccurately attributed to God does not mean that the other was automatically so. Furthermore, it is possible that the steward’s claim was, in fact, true. If one holds to the absolute sovereignty of God, then indeed God did give treasure to the brothers; Joseph was simply the vehicle through which God saw fit to do so. Given God’s commitment to the patriarchal family, it is not unthinkable that he would arrange such provision for the brothers. Finally, the rest of Joseph’s story seems to be governed by divine providence. Each of Joseph’s advancements is by the hand of God. Yet apart from his suffering—his having been sold into slavery—Joseph would have never experienced success in Egypt. Had Joseph not suffered, the covenant family might have perished in the famine and God’s promises to Abraham might have gone unfulfilled. If it were God’s will to prosper Joseph in Egypt ultimately in order to preserve the covenant family and to fulfill the word spoken to Abraham in Genesis 15:12-16, then it is plausible that God ordained Joseph’s suffering as the chosen means of fulfilling his sovereign will. Therefore, we might say that God was just as sovereign over Joseph’s suffering (37:12-35) as he was over Joseph’s successes (37:36-41:57). The fact that God sovereignly worked through the wickedness of Joseph’s brothers did not exempt them from responsibility for their actions; just as God’s use of the


257 There is no doubt that Sanders errantly attributes this statement to Joseph. The fuller quote from Sanders is this: “It should be remembered that Joseph has used language like this before. In 43:23 he says that God gave the money back to his brothers even though Joseph admits that he had the money put in their sacks” (emphasis added). Sanders, The God Who Risks, 55.
Babylonians did not exempt them from moral responsibility for the atrocities they committed (Habakkuk 2:8).

**E. Moses and the Exodus**

Because it is the most significant redemptive event in the Old Testament, the exodus is crucial to a biblical understanding of sovereignty. According to open theism, the book of Exodus portrays God as one who “works with what is available.” The God of Exodus makes use of free human actions in a genuine effort to accomplish his redemptive purposes. The cries of an oppressed people reach God’s ears in Exodus 2:23-25, moving him to act on their behalf. In chapter 3, God decides he “wants to work through Moses in order to deliver the Israelites”; but that desire is no guarantee that Moses—a free agent fully capable of exercising resistance even in the presence of God—will oblige. According to Sanders, God must _persuade_ Moses to carry out his redemptive plan. A meaningful exchange of ideas follows Moses’ initial call in chapter 3. According to Sanders, Moses is not rebuffed for balking at God’s call; rather, God adapts his plan in light of Moses’ valid concerns.\(^{258}\)

Likewise, Sanders argues that God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart (Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8) is best explained by the divine willingness to work with what is presently available. This does not mean that God _controls_ Pharaoh or determines his fate; Pharaoh hardened _his own_ heart before God ever did so.\(^{259}\) It is one thing for God to use the “nonhuman creation” as he wishes (as he does to bring judgment against Egypt); for open theism, it is quite another to suggest that God does so with his “human creation.”\(^{260}\)

The first thing to consider in response to open theism is that the Exodus narrative should be understood in light of God’s promise to Abraham in Genesis 15. In this promise, discussed above, God predicted the future oppression Abraham’s descendents would suffer: “Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions” (Genesis 15:13-14).

\(^{258}\) Sanders, _The God Who Risks_, 57-59.

\(^{259}\) Ibid., 59-60. Cf. Terrence Fretheim, _Exodus_, 96-103.

\(^{260}\) Sanders, _The God Who Risks_, 60-61.
The fulfillment of this prediction has already been discussed above. As God promised, Abraham’s descendants took refuge in a foreign land (Genesis 47-50). There they were eventually mistreated—victims of both slavery and ethnic cleansing (Exodus 1). Just as God foretold, their suffering lasted approximately four hundred years (Exodus 12:40-41), at the end of which time they left Egypt with gold, silver and clothing (Exodus 12:31-42).

It is doubtful that such a detailed prediction could have been fulfilled apart from God’s meticulous sovereignty. The nature of this prediction is such that it cannot easily be attributed to the simple ability to anticipate with great (but imperfect) accuracy the future based on the present state of affairs. God, it seems, would have to have led Abraham’s descendents into Egypt (which is consistent with Joseph’s view of events; cf. Genesis 45:5, 7) and ordained them to endure hardship there. If it were God’s sovereign will for things to unfold as he predicted in Genesis 15, think of all the human choices that might have to be providentially determined in the process: Joseph’s brothers’ decision to sell Joseph into slavery, Pharaoh’s decision to entrust the Egyptian kingdom to Joseph’s stewardship, Joseph’s decision to manage the food supply as he did, Jacob’s decision to send his sons to Egypt in search of grain, Joseph’s decision to be reconciled to his brothers, Pharaoh’s decision to welcome Jacob’s family to Egypt, and a later Pharaoh’s decision to enslave and then attempt to exterminate the Hebrews. If any one of these decisions (and perhaps a number of others not mentioned here) had not been made, then God’s plan for Abraham’s descendants might not have turned out as promised in Genesis 15. Yet the closing chapters of Genesis and the opening chapters of Exodus together reveal that the promise of Genesis 15 was fulfilled in its entirety. Indeed the purpose of Exodus is to show this fulfillment of God’s plan in faithfulness to his covenant family—that is, to the chosen seed.261

As it were, the Hebrew people were tragically oppressed, and their cry rose to the very heavens. The narrator tells us that God “heard their groaning and...remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob” (Exodus 2:24). The result of this hearing and remembrance was that God experienced genuine concern for his people.262

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261 W.H. Gispen, Exodus, Bible Student's Commentary, Ed van der Maas, trans. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 3. Gispen regards the purpose of Exodus in light of Genesis 3:15, arguing that the Hebrews represent the “seed of the woman,” while Pharaoh “typifies the seed of the serpent.”
As is the case with God’s grief in Genesis 6:6, it would not be legitimate to dismiss the text’s comment as a mere anthropomorphism; God’s feelings are real. But it may be too much to say that God was stimulated to action by this cry if by this open theism means to suggest that his intervention was not assured until the Hebrews cried out. Rather, the cries of his people inspired God to “remember” his covenant—that is, to do what he had already bound himself to do—just as he “remembered” Noah in the midst of the flood (Genesis 8:1). God’s observation of the Hebrew’s plight signals the coming of a long-promised deliverance.

In Exodus 3, God chose Moses as the agent of that deliverance. The account of Moses’ dialogue with God (Exodus 3:1–4:17) may have more to say about God’s sovereignty than open theism has suggested. On the one hand, Brevard Childs and Terrence Fretheim argue that the purpose of this narrative is to show that the human will is not overwhelmed by the divine, but remains independent and capable of resisting God, even to his face. God, they argue, takes each of Moses’ four objections (3:13; 4:1, 10, 13) seriously, examining each and responding appropriately. Following Childs and Fretheim’s interpretation, Sanders concludes that, “God does not rebuff Moses for questioning the divine word.”

There is, however, another plausible interpretation of Exodus 3:1–4:17. Childs, Fretheim and Sanders all focus on the process of dialogue; a look at the result of that dialogue may yield a somewhat different perspective. In the end, Moses returns to Egypt just as he was commanded (cf. 3:10; 4:18-31). While his attempt to resist God’s sovereign will results in prolonged dialogue, the result of that dialogue is that God “wears

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263 See Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 57. In one sense, God’s intervention was dependent on the cries for deliverance; for they provide the occasion for God’s stirring. However, God’s work of redemption was certain even before a single cry was uttered, since deliverance was promised to Abraham in Genesis 15.


down Moses’ reluctance and overcomes his hesitancy.” Furthermore, Moses’ final plea, “O Lord, please send someone else to do it” (4:13), betrays the real motivation behind Moses’ balking: Moses is looking to escape his divine calling. Such reluctance, whether motivated by sincere humility or something else, is not uncommon in Scripture (cf. Gideon in Judges 6; Saul in 1 Samuel 10:20-24; Jeremiah in Jeremiah 1:4-10; and Jonah in Jonah 1:1–2:10). In each case, God sovereignly overcame human resistance in order to accomplish his purpose through his chosen instrument. All agree that the calling of the aforementioned individuals is at God’s initiative; what these passages seem to suggest is that the divine calling is also effectual.

Moses’ first two objections in Exodus 3:1–4:17 are met with straightforward answers. He is told how to identify God to the people, and he is given signs that will demonstrate the true nature of his divine calling. In the end, however, God rebuffs Moses’ objections to the divine plan. One can sense God’s patience wearing thin as the narrative progresses; indeed, what is implicit throughout this section is made explicit in 4:14, when “the LORD’s anger burn[s] against Moses.” Moses does not seem to think God’s plan will work or that God has chosen the right person to lead his people (4:1; 3:10). However, God regards Moses’ doubts—inspired by a lack of faith—as invalid. God reveals to Moses that what will come to pass does not depend on human ability; rather, God himself will give Moses the words to say and the ability to say them (4:11-12). As the basis for this promise God unequivocally declares his meticulous sovereignty over human speech and sight. It is he who makes each person’s mouth and either gives or withholds the ability to speak. Likewise, it is he who creates every pair of eyes and endows them with either sight or blindness.

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269 See, for example, Sanders, The God Who Risks, 57.

270 Durham, Exodus, 49-50.
One of the key motifs of the Exodus narrative is the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. In Exodus 3:19-20, God reveals to Moses that Pharaoh will not release the Hebrews “unless a mighty hand compels him.” As Moses prepares for his return to Egypt, God speaks to him once more, telling Moses that he will “harden [Pharaoh’s] heart so that he will not let the people go” (Exodus 4:21). Including this revelation, the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is mentioned at least 17 times. Nine times God promises to harden the Egyptian ruler’s heart (7:3; 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8). The other eight passages simply say that Pharaoh’s heart “became hard” (7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34-35).

Sanders believes that Pharaoh hardened his own heart first, leading God to “work with what [was] available.”272 However, such a view may underestimate the significance of those passages that describe God’s role in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. That God would be involved in the affairs of the heart is of great significance, since in Hebrew thought both intellect and emotion could be attributed to the heart. According to Sarna, the heart was “the controlling center of human actions.”273 To have power over someone’s heart was to have power over his or her will.

Furthermore, the assumption that God could not have taken the initiative in hardening Pharaoh’s heart seems contrary to what would have been the typical Hebrew’s understanding of the situation. Cassuto notes that the average Hebrew attributed all phenomena to God.274 Supporting evidence is not hard to find throughout Scripture; the assumption of absolute sovereignty was so taken for granted that the casualness with which various phenomena are attributed to God might seem blasphemous to the contemporary reader. The narrator of Genesis 20, for example, claimed that God “closed up every womb in Abimelech’s household” because Abimelech had taken Abraham’s wife with the intent of sleeping with her (20:18). In the same context, we learn that God protected Abimelech, preventing him from having sex with Sarah. The author of 1 Samuel 1 claims that it was God who closed and later opened Hannah’s womb (1:5-6,
20). Upon returning to Bethlehem, the widow Naomi told the townswomen that, “the Almighty has made my life very bitter…the Lord has brought me back empty…the Lord has dealt harshly with me” (Ruth 1:20-21). The author of Ruth made no attempt to correct Naomi’s assessment of her lot. Even the accidental slaying of another human being was said to take place only because “God lets it happen” (Exodus 21:13, NIV; “act of God” in the NRSV). Thus it is doubtful the average Hebrew would have felt the tension so obvious to us today when we read that God “hardened Pharaoh’s heart.” The philosophical question of how God could do so without trampling Pharaoh’s volitional capacities was not raised; the narrator was more interested in “Yahweh and his plan for the Hebrews” than he was the plight of Pharaoh.275

To be sure, we must be careful not to suggest that here God has taken a reasonably good man’s heart and reconditioned it for evil. Indeed, Pharaoh’s heart was already tainted by evil. The Egyptian ruler—regarded as divinity—presided over a religious pantheon that was antithetical to the worship of one universally sovereign God.276 Though he was probably not the same Pharaoh who first enslaved the Israelites (cf. 2:15; 4:19), the Pharaoh whose heart God hardened continued the cruel treatment of God’s covenant people.

Finally, one ought to consider the sovereign purpose behind the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Exodus 4:21-23 makes clear that God intended to perform through Moses “all the wonders” he empowered Moses to do (4:21). But these wonders came only as a result of Pharaoh’s stubborn refusal to let the Israelites go (4:21-23; 6:1; 7:14-18; 8:1-4, 15-16, 19-21; 8:32–9:4; 9:7-9, 12-19; 9:35–10:2; 10:20-23). Behind each of the terrible wonders in Exodus is the motif of divine warfare. God wages war with Pharaoh and perhaps with the entire Egyptian pantheon.277 As a result Pharaoh, who thinks himself a god, is rendered powerless. God makes use of naturally occurring

275 Ashby, Exodus, 26-27. Ashby later notes humorously that concern for Pharaoh’s free will has so troubled theologians “that it almost seems that a Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Pharaohs has been formed” (40).

276 Ashby, Exodus, 41.

277 Sarna, Exploring Exodus, 78.
phenomena—rivers, frogs, gnats, flies, disease, hail, locusts and darkness—to accomplish his purpose, thereby demonstrating his mastery over nature and the ease with which he can direct its course. God’s display of wonders—clearly part of his plan from the beginning—was contingent on the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. Perhaps what happens to Pharaoh in Exodus can best be described as follows: God in his sovereignty strengthens Pharaoh’s already hardened heart, ensuring that he will persist in his unbelief, thus giving God the opportunity to display his wonders so both Egypt and Israel will know he is Lord of all.

In summary, it seems difficult to read the Exodus narrative without being confronted with the possibility that God practices meticulous sovereignty in relation to the created order. Sarna has summarized well the lessons one might take from the book of Exodus: (1) God’s sovereignty over nature is absolute; (2) human beings—no matter how powerful—cannot undermine God’s sovereign will and (3) God orchestrates history according to a sovereign purpose, as seen in his care for and guidance of the covenant family.

F. The Covenant

Following the exodus from Egypt, God established his covenant with the people of Israel. John Sanders describes two important motifs related to the establishment of this covenant. The first highlights God’s freedom in making a covenant. Just as God “in freedom…chose Isaac over Ishmael [and] Jacob over Esau,” so God chooses “Israel over the other nations.” It is on the basis of divine grace that God establishes his covenant with Israel—grace that was demonstrated by delivering the Hebrews from bondage.

God’s expectations for his chosen people serve as the second motif in Sanders’ description of the covenant relationship. Naturally, God expects his people to obey the

278 Arguably, the only one of the ten wonders that is distinctly “supernatural” in the typical sense of the word is the plague on the firstborn (Exodus 11–12). This in no way diminishes the miraculous nature of the wonders described in the text, since the narrator’s theological purpose is to demonstrate God’s absolute ability to control nature according to his purposes. For a helpful discussion of this theme, see “Miracles of the Old Creation” in C.S. Lewis, Miracles: A Preliminary Study (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1947), 174-187. See also Sarna, Exploring Exodus, 68-78.

279 Sarna, Exploring Exodus, 2-3.

commands he gives. Sanders argues that there is a sense in which God is therefore dependent on his people, for they must freely choose whether or not they will ratify the covenant. There are no historical guarantees, since God does not unilaterally impose his covenant on the people.  

Open theism argues that God’s plan for Israel goes largely unfulfilled because of Israel’s disobedience. According to Sanders, “A reading of the Bible reveals that, overall, God was very disappointed with Israel.” Likewise, Clark Pinnock suggests that God’s plan for Israel ended in failure, forcing God to develop a new redemptive plan, which in turn “led to the unique role of Jesus.”

The breaking of the covenant grieves God to the point of exasperation, according to Sanders. For example, in Exodus 32, God became so frustrated with the sin of his people (with whom the covenant had just been ratified) that he decided to “destroy the people and start over again with Moses.” Moses, however, believing “it possible to alter the divine word,” successfully persuaded God to abandon such a plan. On this basis Sanders concludes that the future cannot be exhaustively settled in the mind of God: “God permits human input into divine future.”

Much of what open theism says about God’s covenant with Israel is well founded. Indeed, God establishes the covenant at his own initiative. And there is also an important sense in which God genuinely expects his people’s obedience, as John Sanders notes. Nonetheless, there are three areas in which I want to challenge open theism’s final assessment of the covenant relationship.

First, in describing God’s expectations for his people, open theism may have failed to consider the distinction between God’s sovereign will and his moral will. This distinction is mentioned briefly in chapter two and addressed in greater detail in the

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283 Pinnock, Most Moved Mover, 37.
285 Ibid., 63-64.
Here the following summary will suffice: The biblical language used to describe God’s will suggests that there is both a sovereign aspect and a moral aspect to his will. Several passages of Scripture speak of God’s will in terms of his superintendence of history (Psalm 33:11; 40:8; 103:21; Proverbs 19:21; Isaiah 14:24-27; 19:12, 17; 23:9; 46:10-11; Jeremiah 32:19; 49:20; 50:45; Acts 2:23; 4:28; Romans 9:19; Ephesians 1:11; Hebrews 6:17, etc.). Such sovereign activity may include the use of natural and moral evil the means of accomplishing his purposes (cf. Isaiah 45:7; Habakkuk 1–2). At the same time Scripture also speaks of God’s perfect moral will—to which he demands absolute conformity (Psalm 40:8; 107:11; 143:10; Matthew 7:21; 12:50; Mark 3:32; John 7:17; 9:31; Romans 2:18; 12:2; 2 Corinthians 8:5; Ephesians 5:17; 6:6, etc.). Thus it is plausible that God demanded conformity to his moral will while planning beforehand to sovereignly work through Israel’s moral failures for the sake of advancing his redemptive plan. One need not deny God’s sovereignty in order to affirm his expectation of absolute obedience.

Second, open theism may have misjudged somewhat the role of Israel’s failure in God’s redemptive plan. Sanders argues that in making a covenant with Israel, God took a genuine risk. The implication is that God could not know beforehand whether his investment in Israel would yield the desired result. However, Israel’s ultimate failure was never in question; God himself predicted it in Deuteronomy 31:14-29. In this passage, God gave a stark description of Israel’s future rebellion in order that it might serve as a testimony against the people in the day that divine judgment came upon them (31:21). The language of this passage does not describe a future that is particularly open for Israel; her prostitution and God’s resultant anger—both foretold here—seem to be certain. Admittedly, they are anticipated (as open theists might contend) on the basis of God’s past knowledge of Israel’s unfaithfulness. Patrick Miller writes, “The

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286 See Appendix 1: The concept of God’s will in Scripture.


289 J. Ridderbos, Deuteronomy, Bible Student’s Commentary, Ed van der Maas, trans. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 277.
propensity for disobedience is assumed by Moses because of a history of such behavior.” However, this alone may not fully explain the certainty with which Deuteronomy speaks of Israel’s future. Deuteronomy 32 calls to mind the reality of human depravity, which is first mentioned plainly in Genesis 6:5 and 8:21. Every inclination of the human heart tends toward evil. Israel’s future was certain because of human sinfulness—something of which God was fully aware before he established a relationship with Israel—yet God proceeded to make his covenant with them anyway.

If God foreknew Israel’s ultimate rejection of the covenant, in what way did he take a genuine risk by entering into the covenant? Indeed, why would God proceed at all, if his plans for Israel were destined to end in failure? If God knew the certainty of Israel’s ultimate failure and proceeded to establish his covenant with them anyway, it is plausible to suggest that Israel’s rejection of the covenant served a divine purpose. In retrospect, we can see that out of Israel’s failure came God’s greatest plan for humanity: the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Likewise, Paul later revealed that the hardening of Israel made possible the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s redemptive plan (Romans 9–11). Yet even before Christ’s incarnation it was God’s plan to bring salvation to the Gentiles (see Isaiah 56:1-8). Also, Israel’s failure reinforces a key theme of redemptive history: “It does not…depend on human desire or effort, but on God’s mercy” (Romans 9:16). As suggested above, Israel’s rejection of the covenant was anticipated on the basis of overall human depravity. Indeed, Israel proved incapable of keeping the covenant (cf. Psalms 5:9; 10:7; 14:1-3; 36:1; 53:1-3; 140:3; Ecclesiastes 7:20; Isaiah 59:7, 8; Romans 3:9-18). Likewise Paul concluded that no one could be declared righteous on the basis of the law; that is why it is to God’s grace that we must turn for salvation (Romans 3:21-31). With human depravity having taken root prior to the covenant, God arguably could have expected no less than Israel’s failure to keep the covenant. They were, in a sense, given the impossible task—to remain absolutely faithful to God’s law. As such they pictured all humanity’s inability to keep the divine law (cf.

290 Miller, Deuteronomy, 224.

291 Ibid., 224-225.
Romans 3:19-20). Thus it is possible to argue that Israel’s failure—though not desired by God in terms of his moral will—accomplished a sovereign purpose.

Finally, a response to open theism’s description of the dialogue between God and Moses (Exodus 32) is in order. Did God really intend to destroy the Israelites? Did Moses convince God to change course? One alternative explanation to that proposed by open theism is that God’s purpose in offering to make Moses a great nation was to lead him into his divinely appointed, intercessory role. Childs suggests that, “God himself leaves the door open for intercession… That is what a mediator is for!”

God’s statement in Exodus 32 is difficult because it seems that God would have to break his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in order to do what he threatens here. (At least this was Moses’ argument in v.13.) By contrast, Sanders argues that God technically “would remain faithful to his basic commitment,” even if he started over with Moses. However, such a view does not take into consideration Jacob’s prophetic reference to the Davidic monarchy in Genesis 49:10:

\[
\text{The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,} \\
\text{nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet,} \\
\text{until tribute comes to him;} \\
\text{and the obedience of the peoples is his.}
\]

Assuming this is in fact a reference to the Davidic monarchy, if God had destroyed the people of Israel and created a new people from Moses, this prophecy would have gone unfulfilled, since Moses was not of the tribe of Judah. Neither does Sanders’ explanation account for Exodus 2:24-25, where God’s remembers his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob specifically by showing concern for the Israelite people. In

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292 This is not to say that Israel’s salvation depended upon its meritorious keeping of the law. Israel’s salvation was grounded in the paradigmatic redemptive event of the Old Testament—the exodus. Salvation has always been by God’s grace alone. It was on the basis of redemption that Israel was called to obedience; thus, adherence to the law was always intended to be a response to God’s grace, not a means of securing it. However, Israel failed even in its response to grace, thereby pointing the way to God’s ultimate plan of salvation, realized in Christ.


view of this, God arguably viewed his dealings with Israel as the sole means of fulfilling his covenant to the patriarchs.

Though God relented in direct response to Moses’ plea, it was God who put Moses in a position to intercede on behalf of his people in the first place. Could it be that Moses’ response was the one God in his sovereign will desired all along?

None of these objections should diminish our understanding the severity of God’s threat in Exodus 32. God took Israel’s sin seriously, and though he relented on the basis of his divine prerogative to show mercy, Israel by no means escaped all the consequences of their behavior (Exodus 32:27–33:6). In the end, however, God remained faithful to his covenant—that is, to his original promise first revealed to the patriarchs in Genesis.

G. Saul and David

The stories of Saul’s downfall and David’s ascendance (1 Samuel 13–16) raise important questions about the nature of divine sovereignty and immutability. In 1 Samuel 8–9, God answered the people’s wrongheaded demand for a king by directing Samuel to anoint Saul as Israel’s first monarch. Saul, however, failed miserably as king—first by offering a burnt offering in Samuel’s absence (13:1-14) and later by ignoring God’s command to wipe out the Amalekites (15:1-35). In response to Saul’s first failure, God revealed that there would be no Saulic dynasty (13:14). In response to the second act of disobedience, God further revealed that Saul himself had been rejected as king (15:23).

In the context of Saul’s rejection, Scripture makes seemingly contradictory statements about God’s changeability. Both preceding and following the confrontation between Samuel and Saul (15:12-33), Scripture reveals that the Lord “was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel” (15:35, cf. 11; NIV, “grieved”). However, when Saul heard the word of judgment and begged forgiveness, Samuel responded with a powerful declaration of the Lord’s unchanging purpose: “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this very day…Moreover the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind; for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind” (1 Samuel 15:28-29).

Various attempts have been made to resolve the apparent contradiction in 1 Samuel 15. Norman Geisler argues that in view of the mutually exclusive statements in this chapter, “it [is] necessary to interpret at least one of these instances as non-literal.” (For Geisler it is
the description of God’s grief or repentance in verses 11 and 35 that is to be taken
figuratively.)\textsuperscript{295} In other words, where Scripture speaks of God changing his mind, such
language is necessarily anthropomorphic and therefore does not contradict the assertion that
God is unchanging. John Sanders rejects this conclusion, arguing that while it tells us what
such passages may \textit{not} say, such a view fails to explain what they \textit{do} say.\textsuperscript{296} Furthermore,
Sanders suggests that Geisler’s reading of 1 Samuel 15:28-29 is not justified by the context.
All this passage means, according to Sanders, is that, “God reserves the right to alter his
plans in response to human initiative, and…also…not to alter an alteration.”\textsuperscript{297} In 15:28-29,
God is simply declaring his refusal to repent of his repenting: He has changed his mind about
making Saul king; he will not change his mind on the subject again. To universalize such
statements in Scripture is to read more into Scripture than is really there, according to
Sanders.

There are perhaps alternate ways of explaining 1 Samuel 15. In any event, it is
unnecessary to accept Geisler’s assumption that one of the divine repenting statements in this
passage has to be “non-literal.” The statements in 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35 may refer to God’s
\textit{emotional} anguish over what has transpired (cf. Genesis 6:6), as suggested by the NIV’s
translation of these passages (“The \textit{LORD} was \textit{grieved},” emphasis added). If that is the case, it
does not necessarily follow that God’s sovereign purposes have somehow failed. Bruce Ware
argues, “Just because God knows in advance that some event will occur, this does not
preclude God from experiencing appropriate emotions and expressing appropriate reactions
when it actually happens.”\textsuperscript{298} Indeed, to dismiss 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35 as something less
than literal statements about the divine nature would cast doubt on God’s capacity for
experiencing such profound emotions that are, in fact, integral to his character. If God lacks
such capacity, how could it be said that he loves his children or has compassion on lost

\textsuperscript{295} Norman L. Geisler, \textit{Creating God in the Image of Man? The New Open View of God—Neothesim’s
Dangerous Drift} (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1997), 78.

\textsuperscript{296} Sanders, \textit{The God Who Risks}, 69.

\textsuperscript{297} Ibid., 69-70. Cf. Walter Brueggemann, \textit{First and Second Samuel}, Interpretation: A Bible

\textsuperscript{298} Ware, \textit{God’s Lesser Glory}, 91.
sinners? Indeed, these two Old Testament passages reveal a very important aspect of God’s nature—his ability to grieve over our sin.

It can even be argued that God’s sovereign purposes for Israel endure through 1 Samuel 13–16. Such a conclusion is plausible for three reasons. First, note the context in which Saul was made king. Saul was chosen in response to the people’s demand for a king in 8:4-5. One could argue on the basis of preceding scriptures that it was God’s sovereign intent from the beginning to provide a human king for Israel (cf. Genesis 49:10; Numbers 24:7, 17; Deuteronomy 17:14-20). It was not the kingship itself that was sinful, but the reason for which the people demanded such a leader. Saul was the king given on the people’s terms, and it seems he initially fit their idea of what a king should be like (9:2). By contrast, David was the man whom God chose on his own terms (13:14; 15:28; 16:1-13). So perhaps it should not be so surprising that the first king failed as he did.

Second, Saul does not fit the description of Israel’s future king found in Jacob’s dying oracle (Genesis 49:10). Jacob prophesied that, “The scepter will not depart from Judah,” but Saul was a Benjamite (1 Samuel 9:1). David, on the other hand was of Judah’s tribe, consistent with Jacob’s blessing to his son Judah. The words spoken through Jacob appear to be fulfilled in the eternal reign of David’s descendant, Jesus Christ.

Third, the rejection of Saul and the ascendance of David fit a distinctive pattern of election discussed in chapter two: God’s sovereign blessing repeatedly extends itself not to the firstborn, but to the lesser. Just as Seth was blessed instead of Cain, Isaac instead of Ishmael, Jacob instead of Esau and Joseph instead of his brothers, so too David—the second of Israel’s kings and the youngest in his own family—was the favored king through whom God established his everlasting kingdom. At the very least, the emergence of this pattern in 1 Samuel 13–16 should not be cause for great surprise.

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299 This becomes especially significant when one considers that it was through the Israelite monarchy that God provided the Messiah.

300 To be sure, we must take seriously Samuel’s statement in 1 Samuel 13:13-14, where he tells Saul in response to his first failure that Saul’s kingdom would have been established for all time had he obeyed God’s command. But Sanders may be reading too much into the text when he says on the basis of this passage, “God had originally planned to establish Saul’s household as a perpetual kingship.” (See Sanders, The God Who Risks, 70.) Samuel’s statement may have more to do with the moral will of God—i.e., his desire for obedience—than it does with the sovereign will of God—i.e., his plan that governs history.
Another possible explanation for the apparent contradiction in 1 Samuel 15 is that verses 11, 28-29 and 35 together express paradoxical truths—that is, that God is both unchanging (15:28-29) and changing (15:11, 35). Ralph Klein notes a helpful parallel in comparing Isaiah 49:15 to Jeremiah 31:34: “The God who can never forget Zion forgets his people’s sins.” Indeed, there are other paradoxes in Scripture with which we must wrestle: the triune nature of a singular God, the full humanity and full divinity of Christ, God’s sovereign purpose and anguish for human suffering (e.g., John 11:4, 33), among others. So it is possible that the answer our difficulty with 1 Samuel 15 is that we must be content ourselves to live with the paradox of God’s simultaneously changeable and unchangeable nature.

In any case, it is not necessary to conclude that God’s sovereignty is somehow limited in 1 Samuel 13–16. For we see in the end that the person of God’s choosing ascended to the throne, laying the foundation for the Messianic deliverer to come. Perhaps the narrator deliberately crafted his story in such a way to cause us to expect something greater than Saul. Or perhaps we must accept an element of paradox when reading these chapters. Either way, it appears to be God’s purposes that drive the progression of the story in 1 Samuel.

**H. Additional Old Testament Insights Into God’s Sovereignty**

Scripture is replete with general affirmations of God’s sovereign power. Some of these statements, such as God’s claim to create both the seeing and blind and the deaf and dumb (Exodus 4:11), occur within the context of the narratives discussed above. Others are found in the wisdom literature and prophetic books (e.g., Proverbs 16:9; Isaiah 29:16; 45:7; 46:8-10; Jeremiah 18:6; etc.). Critiques of open theism often gravitate toward these passages, which they generally interpret to support the notion of God’s meticulous sovereignty. John Sanders rejects this interpretation, calling it “hermeneutical malpractice.” For Sanders, the alleged crime in the conventional interpretation of these passages is that commentators “jump from particular statements [i.e., statements whose application is limited

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to the context in which they occur] to universal statements.” The primary reason such scriptural comments should not be universalized, according to Sanders, is because his “survey of Scripture showed that God has sovereignly decided not to ‘control’ everything and his purposes can be rejected.”\(^{304}\) As demonstrated above, however, Sander’s survey of Scripture is open to challenge at several points; thus it seems relevant to return to the question of whether passages like Proverbs 16:9 can be appropriately universalized. For the sake of brevity, our analysis will focus primarily on Proverbs 16:1-9 and a few key statements from Isaiah.

Proverbs 16:1-9 discusses the relationship between human planning and the divine will. Verse 9 concludes, “The human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps.” Sanders warns against taking this proverb as a universal statement because the sayings that comprise the book of Proverbs are “guidelines for godly living rather than universal principles that always hold true.”\(^{305}\) Sanders reads Proverbs 16 as a call to seek God’s wisdom when making plans; it is not meant to suggest that human plans will always fail if not girded by God’s sovereign will.\(^{306}\)

Indeed, Proverbs is best understood as a “guidebook for successful living.”\(^{307}\) As such not all the statements contained therein can be universalized (e.g., Proverbs 22:6). However, such a hermeneutical restriction should not be indiscriminately imposed. Some of the proverbial sayings, including 16:1-9, have a distinctly “religious emphasis” (cf. 15:3, 8, 9, 11; 19:21; 20:24; 25:2), in contrast to the majority of sayings in Proverbs that offer practical wisdom for everyday life.\(^{308}\) Though the more theologically oriented sayings are in the minority, their significance should not be categorically dismissed.

Proverbs 16:1-9 provides a necessary balance to the wisdom of careful planning, which is lauded in 14:15 and 21:5. Indeed, it is wise to plan; however, it is also wise to

\(^{304}\) Ibid.

\(^{305}\) Ibid, 84.

\(^{306}\) Ibid.


\(^{308}\) Ibid, 465.
remember one’s place in the created order.\textsuperscript{309} God’s plan takes precedence (16:1), so it is folly for someone to boast about his or her own plans (27:1). The writer of Proverbs 16:1-9 (probably Solomon) affirms that God orchestrates both good and bad according to divine purpose (16:4; cf. Ecclesiastes 7:14). Indeed, this proverb is a helpful contribution to a guidebook for successful living, because it reminds us that even if we follow the wisdom contained therein, temporal success is not an absolute guarantee. As Roland Murphy concludes, “The final result [of human plans] is the Lord’s doing, over which humans have no real control, and it may not be ‘success’ that is yearned for.”\textsuperscript{310} Thus, it is plausible that Proverbs 16:1-9 can legitimately be read as a general statement having universal application.

The latter half of Isaiah (chs. 40–66) contains numerous passages describing God’s control over what comes to pass in redemptive history. Specifically, Isaiah declares that what sets God apart from idols is his ability to reveal the future as he has determined it (44:6-23; 45:20-21; 48:1-11). Isaiah also foretells God’s redemptive plan in striking detail, including specific reference to Cyrus, who is to serve as God’s agent.\textsuperscript{311} This reference was made approximately 150 years before Cyrus took the Babylonian throne.\textsuperscript{312} The book of Isaiah is also saturated with prophetic references to the coming Messiah, frequently referred to as “my servant” (see chs. 42–53).

As with Proverbs 16:9, John Sanders cautions against making universal application of passages in Isaiah that might suggest God’s governance of history. These texts (see also Amos 3:6) have “a specific historical occasion in view”; therefore, their meaning should not be extrapolated out from their immediate historical context.\textsuperscript{313} Furthermore, the fact that God finds it necessary to reveal that he is the one who brought about the events described in these


\textsuperscript{310} Roland E. Murphy, Proverbs, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco: Word, Inc., 1998), 121.

\textsuperscript{311} I am assuming that Isaiah was responsible for the basic content of the entire book that bears his name. It is not within the scope of the present undertaking to discuss questions of authorship, though I find the arguments against Isaianic authorship of the latter half of the book (chs.40–66) to be unconvincing.

\textsuperscript{312} The prediction naming Cyrus creates a problem if we assume God generally does not determine the choices people make. If this is so because God respects human freedom, then how is he justified for violating that freedom (assuming that he must do so in order to bring Cyrus to existence)? Think of the choices that might have to be determined in order for God to raise up the very person mentioned in this passage.

\textsuperscript{313} Sanders, The God Who Risks, 82-83.
passages undercuts the idea that God is the ultimate cause behind every event, according to Sanders: “If God is the cause of everything, then why single out certain things as being ‘from God?’”

In his interpretation of these Isaianic passages, Sanders does not consider the possibility that Isaiah is making general statements about the nature of God’s sovereignty and applying them to specific historical contexts. If this is the case, then it is valid to draw a universalizing conclusion about God’s sovereignty on the basis of these passages. For example, in Isaiah 41:21-29, God puts the gods of the nations on trial (cf. 44:1). His purpose in doing so is to expose these idols for what they really are—worthless blocks of wood. (Later Isaiah notes with irony the fact that idols and kindling wood come from the same block; see 44:12-20.) God challenges these idols to “tell us what the future holds, so we may know that you are gods” (44:23). In the ancient Near East, the ability to predict the future was a test of divinity. It was generally accepted that any legitimate deity would know the future, and God took advantage of this assumption to expose pagan idols as frauds. Not only must any legitimate deity be able to tell the future, it must also have the ability to interpret the “former things…so that we may consider them, and that we may know their outcome” (41:22, emphasis added). The text assumes that a real god must be able to “interpret history [to show] that past and future are…linked in one divinely controlled plan.”

Here the writer introduces a general truth—one that seems to affirm God’s meticulous sovereignty. This truth occurs within a particular context, but this fact does not necessarily diminish the universal implications of what is stated.

In the case of Isaiah 45:7-12, the writer appears to use a general declaration of God’s sovereignty to justify God’s particular course of action outlined in the preceding verses. The plan revealed here might have distressed the Hebrew reader, since a Gentile-led liberation of God’s people was seemingly a “death-knell” to their hope for a perpetual Davidic dynasty. Thus God forestalled any objection to his stated course, noting that clay has no right to

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314 Ibid., 83.


316 J. Alec Motyer, The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 359. It was not an actual “death-knell,” however, since Jesus is the fulfillment of the promised perpetual dynasty.
question the potter’s design (45:9; cf. Jeremiah 18:5-6). Neither does creation have the right to challenge the plan of its Creator. The theological point of God’s response seems to be that he has the right to do with his creation (including human beings) what he pleases and that, as the sovereign potter, he in fact does what he pleases. As with 41:21-29, this passage occurs (and must be read) within a particular historical context; but this does not negate the universal application of its meaning.

I. Summary

Each of the narratives considered above (except for that of Jacob and Esau) is interpreted by Sanders to support the notion of an open God who for the most part is generally but not meticulously sovereign. It is my opinion that a careful reading of these narratives in conjunction with other scriptural statements about God’s sovereignty reveals that God functions as a divine author in each case, weaving together the stories told therein in perfect accord with his sovereign will. Nevertheless, I also believe that God experiences genuine emotions as redemptive history unfolds; this need not be denied in order to affirm God’s meticulous sovereignty over the affairs of his creation.

XVIII. Redemption Narratives of the New Testament

The redemptive drama reaches its climactic moment in the New Testament as Jesus arrives on the scene, bringing with him the hope of salvation. John Sanders laments, “Most studies of providence say little or nothing about the words and works of Jesus.” 317 Whether or not Sanders’ perspective of the theological landscape is accurate, his point—that inquiries into the nature of God’s sovereignty must look to the gospels and to the life of Christ for important insights—is valid. This is true perhaps most of all for a narrative-oriented study such as this. Therefore, the remainder of this study will be devoted almost entirely to the account of Jesus’ life and death as recorded in the four gospels. I will examine some of the implications of Jesus’ story for our understanding of divine sovereignty.

A. Open Theism and the Life and Death of Jesus

For John Sanders, the life and death of Jesus present a powerful picture of a God who works with what is available and remains open to change, should the future not unfold as he

anticipated. According to Sanders, there are several indications of this in the text. God desires to bless Mary with the birth of the Messiah but seeks her consent before proceeding with his plan (Luke 1:26-38).\textsuperscript{318} Jesus demonstrates his power through healing various sicknesses but allows himself to be changed in the process—healing people he initially had no intention to heal and changing his plans in response to the people’s requests (cf. Matthew 15:21-28; Mark 2:1-12; 6:1-5; Luke 8:43-48).\textsuperscript{319} During the course of his ministry, Jesus does not get everything he wants: Judas, whom Sanders believes did not betray Jesus (see below), is a perfect example. Sanders suggests that Jesus was “not…overly successful in reshaping the disciples’ understanding [of] messiahship…and Judas was apparently no exception” (cf. John 13:18-30).\textsuperscript{320} Finally, Jesus lives with purpose; but the cross is not a predetermined part of that purpose. Only in Gethsemane where “Father and Son…come to understand that there is no other way” did the cross become Jesus’ certain destiny.\textsuperscript{321}

Sanders’ interpretation of Jesus’ life and death is open to challenge at several points. What follows will interact with select narratives from the four gospels for the purpose of (1) raising some challenges to the open view of Jesus’ ministry and (2) offering, based on these narratives, some contributions to the view that God is meticulously sovereign.

\textbf{B. The Birth of Jesus}

John Sanders interprets the angelic announcement of Jesus’ birth (Luke 1:28-38) to emphasize God’s dependence on Mary for accomplishing the divine purpose. Mary “does not simply acquiesce”; she gives her consent only after the angel answers to her satisfaction her question concerning the divine plan. Yet her questioning does not invite rebuke; the messenger respects what Mary has to say and responds accordingly. Sanders concludes that Mary’s role in Messiah’s incarnation was by no means guaranteed: “If Mary had declined…then God would have sought other avenues.”\textsuperscript{322}

\textsuperscript{318} Ibid., 92.
\textsuperscript{319} Ibid, 96-98.
\textsuperscript{320} Ibid, 98-99.
\textsuperscript{321} Ibid., 100-101.
\textsuperscript{322} Ibid., 92.
A careful reading of Luke’s narrative does not appear to support Sanders’ overall conclusion. The angelic declaration to Mary reads more like a statement of what will happen than what might happen. That things will come to pass exactly as described seems to be certain—perhaps even taken for granted by the angel.\(^{323}\)

Luke puts emphasis squarely on God’s sovereign choice of Mary as the instrument through whom he will advance his redemptive purpose. Notably, the angel addressed Mary as κεχαριτωμένη (kecharitomene, favored one), a term that occurs only twice in the New Testament—here and in Ephesians 1:6. In the biblical context, χαρίζω refers to a divine bestowal of grace or favor.\(^{324}\) In Ephesians 1:6 (where Paul refers to the grace bestowed upon those “predestined…for adoption,” v.5) the bestowal is unmerited, and likely the same is true in Mary’s case.\(^ {325}\) When pronounced upon an individual, a blessing like this usually anticipates an important event in redemptive history. For example, Noah was the recipient of divine favor just prior to his family’s deliverance from the flood (Genesis 6:8). Gideon was told of God’s favor on him when he was commissioned to deliver God’s people (Judges 6:12); and Hannah found favor when she gave birth to Samuel, one of Israel’s most important prophets (1 Samuel 1:18-20). Furthermore, the calling that accompanies such divine favor is remarkably effective. I am not aware of a single scriptural context in which God calls an individual to serve a particular role in redemptive history and that individual successfully refuses his or her divine calling.\(^{326}\) Thus we may rightly expect Mary’s response in Luke 1:38 when we read about God’s plan for her life.

The language of the angelic revelation may also suggest that Mary’s role in the redemptive drama is not open for refusal. The use of the indicative future tense, which Bock


\(^{324}\) BDAG, 1081.

\(^{325}\) See Bock, *Luke 1:1—9:50*, 109. The bestowal of grace can be merited or unmerited, so context is the most important factor in determining this. Bock argues that when God is the agent of bestowal, the act should be regarded as “gracious.” See also Walter L. Liefeld, *Luke*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984).

\(^{326}\) To be sure, the divine call often meets with resistance at the outset (e.g., Noah, Jonah); but in the end, God always seems to win. Cf. Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Saul, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Jonah, Mary, the twelve disciples (the question of Judas’ role is addressed below), and Paul.
argues “has virtually an imperatival force,” seems to reinforce the certainty of what is revealed in 1:31: you will conceive (συνλήψη, sullémpse)...you will give birth (τέξη, têxe)...you will call (καλέσεις, kaléseis).  

John Sanders is right in noting that the narrative in no sense casts aspersion on Mary’s question in Luke 1:34. However, even this can arguably be interpreted in a manner consistent with the view that what will come to pass has already been firmly decided in the counsel of God. Mary asks the angel, “How will this be...since I am a virgin?” Her question does not imply an element of doubt or a lack of faith; were it so, she most likely would have demanded an evidentiary sign, as Zechariah did (cf. Luke 1:18). Note the contrast between Zechariah’s question and Mary’s: Zechariah asks how he will know (Κατά τί γνώσομαι) what the angel tells him is true (1:18), whereas Mary simply asks how (Πώς ἔσται τοῦτο), in light of her virginity, God will accomplish what has been revealed to her (1:34).  

Also, given the nature of Mary’s question, it is possible she assumed that what the angel said would happen was already coming to pass or sure to do so in the very near future. It seems difficult to make sense of Mary’s reference to her virginity if she did not understand the angel’s prediction of her conceiving a son in this manner. Otherwise, her virginity would hardly be a problem—at least it would no longer be once she married Joseph, probably within a year’s time. While excessive speculation on the timing of Mary’s conception is perhaps best avoided, it can be argued from Mary’s response to the angel (1:34) that she apparently assumed what was revealed to her was a matter of certainty, not of mere possibility.  

Despite the apparent certainty of God’s revealed plan, Mary’s final response (1:38) to the angelic announcement is instructive. She identifies herself as the Lord’s δούλη (dóule, slave, servant, bondservant) and graciously submits herself to the plan of God. Liefeld

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329 Cf. Liefeld, Luke. Liefeld suggests that Mary at least “assumed an immediate fulfillment before marriage.”

suggests that in the Old Testament, the type of response shown by Mary “characterized genuine believers and…should characterize believers today.”

C. Divine Election: The Prerogative and Power of Jesus’ Call

John Sanders does not discuss Jesus’ selection of disciples or his teaching about election in John 6:35-51. Both, however, are suggestive of God’s sovereign power as he weaves together the story of redemption.

Jesus’ calling of the twelve disciples is the subject of several narratives in the four gospels (Matthew 4:18-22; 9:9-13; Mark 1:16-20; 2:13-17; 3:13-19; Luke 5:1-11, 27-32; 6:12-19; John 1:35-42). Two things—both of which have implications for our understanding of sovereignty—deserve mention. First, Jesus takes the initiative in calling individuals to be his disciples; the Messiah handpicks a select group to comprise his inner circle of followers. Donald Hagner comments that, “The invitation of Jesus amounts to a demand based on electing grace.” In collecting a group of followers as he did, Jesus necessarily singled out some people and passed over others, as is especially evident in the calling of Levi the tax collector. (Note Luke’s use of the term ἔθεασατο [ἐθέατο, see, look at, behold], intensifying Jesus’ “ beholding” of Levi; see 5:27.) Jesus’ method of gathering disciples may have been perceived as unusual—if not outright scandalous—in his day. It was customary then for disciples to choose their teacher rather than to be chosen, as Jesus’ followers were. In reversing the culturally accepted pattern, Jesus defied an elitist mindset and demonstrated his prerogative to gather followers of his own choosing.

Second, these narratives reveal the effectual nature of Jesus’ call to the disciples. Every time Jesus summoned followers by name, they responded with immediate obedience. None—not even Judas Iscariot—resisted Jesus’ call (see Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-19). The gospel narrators note more than once the haste with which Jesus’ disciples left everything...
behind to follow him. Peter and Andrew left their nets “at once” (Matthew 4:20; Mark 1:18); James and John left their dumbstruck father standing in his boat (Matthew 4:22; Mark 1:20).\(^{335}\) Whereas Matthew and Mark emphasize the *immediacy* of the disciples’ response, Luke highlights the *cost* of their following: Simon, James, John and Matthew “left everything” to follow Jesus (Luke 5:11, 28). The nature of the disciples’ response to Jesus is indicative of the power with which his call went out to those whom he chose.\(^{336}\)

It is even possible that Jesus deliberately excluded some from becoming followers, offensive though it may be to our ears. Such a practice was not unheard of among the more radical teachers of Jesus’ day.\(^{337}\) Mark 4 seems to describe Jesus using parables in order to obscure his message. His plan is so successful that not even the disciples understand him (4:10, 34b). To the crowd at large he refuses to speak in anything *but* parables (4:34a). By contrast, when he was alone with his handpicked disciples, “he explained everything” (4:34b). Talking privately with his disciples, Jesus revealed his purpose for speaking in parables “to those on the outside.” Quoting Isaiah 6:9, 10, Jesus explained that he did so *in order that* (ινα),

> “they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!”

—Mark 4:12 (cf. Luke 8:10)

Robert Gundry concludes that Jesus “teaches in parables to desensitize outsiders—purposefully…lest they convert and be forgiven.”\(^{338}\) Whether Jesus’ cryptic teaching actually hardens outsiders’ hearts or merely exposes their already hard hearts (cf. Isaiah 6:10a),\(^{339}\) the

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\(^{335}\) Robert Gundry stresses the significance of Mark’s statement that James and John left their father in the boat. Such abandonment would have been unthinkable in a patriarchal society like that of ancient Judaism. See Robert H. Gundry. *Mark: A Commentary on His Apology for the Cross* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans’s Publishing Company, 1993), 67.


\(^{339}\) Perhaps it is not inconceivable that both are true to an extent. The narrator of Exodus sometimes attributed the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart to God’s own hand; in other instances where the hardening is mentioned, no such attribution is made.
result appears to be the same: Jesus effectively limits his following to those he regards as his “true family” (cf. Mark 3:34-35).340

Because of its apparent description of election, John 6:35-40 deserves special mention. In verse 35, Jesus reveals that he is the bread of life (a fact heretofore missed by the crowd; cf. vv.32-34). Those who come to him find satisfaction, yet the crowd with whom he speaks here has not truly come to him. To them, Jesus is a mere novelty—a means of filling their bellies (v.26) and putting on a show (v.30). Yet Jesus in no way regards the crowd’s unbelief as a failure of his mission, for, “All whom the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away” (6:37). The success of Jesus’ ministry is not measured by the percentage of people who respond to his message. Indeed, Jesus seems confident that 100% of those given to him by the Father will in fact be saved. Carson concludes, “Jesus’ confidence in the success of his mission is frankly predestinarian.”341 As for the second half of the verse, it appears to be a literary device known as litotes—a deliberate understatement that expresses a certain point by negating the opposition point. The significance of John 6:37b is this: Everyone who comes to Jesus (i.e., everyone the Father has given to Jesus; see 6:37a) he will surely keep in (the opposite of, “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away.”).342 Jesus then reveals that he will preserve all these in keeping with his Father’s sovereign will: “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day” (6:39). Thus, Jesus’ teaching in John 6:35-40 seems to emphasize (1) the divine prerogative in electing some to salvation and (2) Jesus’ power to keep (i.e., to preserve) those given to him by the Father. Arguably, the sovereignty of God in the salvation of the elect is a “major theme” in the Gospel of John (cf. 10:29, 17:1-4, 6, 9-10, 24), perhaps lending credibility to the concept of meticulous sovereignty.343

340 Gundry, Mark, 6.


342 Ibid.

D. Jesus’ Healing Ministry and the Purpose of Sickness

Sanders’ notes rightly that Jesus’ healing ministry was motivated by his compassion for people. Of Jesus’ feeding of the four thousand, Sanders writes,

*Jesus miraculous feeding...does not occur out of thin air. The people involved in the miracle have entered into relationship with Jesus, and Jesus works to enlarge the resources available. Divine providence occurs within historically contextualized settings. Miracles such as this do not just happen anytime, anywhere for any reason. The messiahship of Jesus is being demonstrated.*

Such a portrayal of Jesus’ healing ministry is a welcome summary of the significance of miracles in Jesus’ ministry. At the same time, the depiction of Jesus’ miraculous activity in the gospels says some important things about Jesus’ sovereign power that should not be missed.

There are perhaps two particularly important things to note about Jesus’ healing ministry. First is the apparent ease with which Jesus performs miracles. A “mere word” or a “mere touch” brings the sought after healing. The dead wake at Jesus’ command (Matthew 9:18-19, 23-25; Mark 5:22-24a, 38-42; Luke 8:41-42, 49-56; John 11:1-44). His power is so great that he need not do anything to accomplish miraculous healing: A mere touch of his robe can cure a woman of her bleeding disorder (Mark 5:24b-34). In addition to miracles of healing and resurrection, Jesus calms a storm, walks on water, turns jars of water into wine, multiplies food, retrieves a coin from a fish, withers a fig tree, and twice superintends the disciples’ great catch of fish. Such miracles demonstrate Jesus’ mastery—that is, his sovereignty—over nature.

Second, Jesus’ miracles reveal that sickness can serve a divine purpose. This is explicitly affirmed on two separate occasions—first, as Jesus heals a man born blind (John 9:3-5) and second, upon being told that his friend Lazarus had fallen ill (11:4). In the case of the former, Jesus rejected the notion that the man’s blindness was caused by some particular sin of either the man or his parents (11:2-3). Instead, Jesus revealed that the man suffered from lifelong blindness “in order that God’s accomplishment in his life might be


revealed” (AT). In other words, the man’s blindness seems to have fit within the sovereign plan of God: He was born blind in order to be healed (cf. Exodus 4:11). But even the man’s healing was not an end in itself. Rather, he was healed so people might see God’s accomplishment in his life. Jesus’ healing ministry was not an end unto itself; it was meant to direct people toward God’s revealed glory.

The story of Jesus’ friend Lazarus provides similar insight into the divine purpose for suffering. Upon hearing that Lazarus is sick, Jesus responds that his illness “will not end in death” (11:4). At first glance, Jesus’ statement may appear to lend credibility to the view that God lacks perfect foreknowledge. Lazarus did die from his illness; Jesus appears to have been mistaken. However, a careful reading of this verse as a whole reveals that Jesus is talking about the ultimate purpose of Lazarus’ malady; his statement does not suggest ignorance of the severity of Lazarus’ illness. A literal translation of 11:4 might read, “This sickness is not to [πρὸς] death…” Πρὸς seems to indicate purpose or result in this context. Death is neither the purpose for which Lazarus is sick, nor is it his final destiny with respect to his illness. The TNIV provides a perfectly appropriate translation—“This sickness will not end in death”—if we understand the word “end” to refer to the ultimate goal, destiny or purpose of Lazarus’ sickness. Jesus explains that the revelation of God’s glory—not death—is the ultimate purpose for Lazarus’ sickness (11:4b), just as it was for the man’s blindness in John 9:3.

As the narrative progresses, we are confronted with the strange reality that Jesus’ love for Martha, Mary and Lazarus motivates him to stay where he is for two additional days: “Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus; accordingly, when he heard that Lazarus was sick, he then remained where he was for two more days” (AT). If translated

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346 Greek ἵνα. Could be either a result clause (in which case it is best translated “with the result that” or “resulting in”) or a purpose clause (in which case it is best translated “in order that”). See Carson, The Gospel According to John, 362. Given the context—his disciples wanted to know why the man was born blind—I believe that ἵνα is most likely functioning as a purpose clause in this context.

347 I translated τὰ ἔργα τοῦ θεοῦ as “God’s accomplishment” because, given the context, it appears to refer to the miraculous work Jesus was about to perform—a work that could only come from God. See BDAG, 390. See also Johannes Louw and Eugene A. Nida, Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains, vol. 1, second edition (New York: United Bible Societies, 1989), 512.

348 BDAG, 874.

this way, Jesus’ decision to delay his trip to Bethany was *in accordance* with his love for Martha, Mary and Lazarus. How can this be, especially when Jesus knew of Lazarus’ death (11:11)? Perhaps the answer is that God’s desire to reveal his glory and his love for his children are compatible with each other. By human standards of humility and self-deprecation, the idea of a God whose driving purpose is to reveal his own glory seems inappropriate—perhaps suggesting an unhealthy degree of self-absorption on God’s part. However, John 11:6 seems to suggest that the revelation of God’s glory and his love for human beings go hand in hand. Perhaps this is because God’s glory leads to what is best for human beings. In any case, Jesus’ movements are directed by the promotion of God’s glory *and* by his love for Martha, Mary and Lazarus. The result is not that Jesus is torn in two directions; rather, he moves with clear, unconflicted purpose.

The fact that Jesus is driven by sovereign purpose does not lessen the awful nature of what he confronts in Bethany. Upon his arrival, Jesus is twice described as being “deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (John 11:33, 38; just “deeply moved” in v.38). The term translated “deeply moved” is ἐμβριμάω. In other contexts, ἐμβριμάω functions as a term of strong anger or indignation; it is plausible that the same meaning is present here. At what, then, is Jesus so angry? It is possible that Jesus was angered by the crowd’s apparent unbelief (11:32, 37). However, it seems equally plausible that Jesus anger was motivated by the fact that the one he loved (11:3, 36) had died. Clearly part of God’s redemptive plan is to reverse the curse of the Fall—that is, death (cf. 11:25). At Lazarus’ tomb Jesus is confronted with the stench of death, and it affects him deeply. The fact that what is before him is by the hand of God does not reduce his ability to feel strong emotion toward his friend’s death. Indeed, we have seen elsewhere that God is capable of profound emotional experience (cf. Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:11, 35).

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350 Cf. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 407-408. Carson argues that the particles ὅποτε ὄπως are best translated to indicate result—e.g., “therefore.” I am grateful to Rob Wilkerson, associate pastor at Grace Community Church in Hudsonville, MI, for initially pointing out the plausibility of such a translation.


352 See Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 415-416. I believe the latter is the more likely interpretation because of Jesus’ weeping in v.35. Os Guinness first introduced me to this possibility through a sermon he preached on John 11 at Falls Church Episcopal (Fairfax, VA) during the summer of 1997 and through a subsequent conversation in the spring of 2001.
Thus, it seems that a careful reading John 11 leads us to contend with both God’s sovereignty in the midst of tragedy; at the same time we should recognize his profound indignation toward the infralapsarian human condition.\textsuperscript{353} In any case, the two miraculous accounts discussed above seem to reveal God’s superintendence of human suffering (at least in these two instances) toward a divine purpose.

\textbf{E. Judas’ Betrayal of Jesus}

To avoid a predestinarian view of Judas’ role in the redemptive drama, John Sanders argues that Judas did not “betray” Jesus, noting that the term used—\textit{παραδιδόμι} (\textit{paradidōmi})—simply means “hand over” or “deliver.”\textsuperscript{354} Relying heavily on William Klassen’s study of Judas’ life, Sanders notes that, “Judas was an apostle, a recognized member of the twelve disciples. He was on friendly terms with Jesus.”\textsuperscript{355} Sanders speculates that Judas had a misguided notion of messiahship—one that Jesus undoubtedly sought to correct. To the very end—even as he handed Judas the sop during the last supper—Jesus reached out to Judas as a friend. Judas, however, handed Jesus over to the Jewish leaders, but not with the intent to betray him. Sanders argues that Judas hoped “being confronted by the authorities [would] force Jesus to take on the role of political liberator.” In any case, Sanders does not regard the events of Judas’ life to have been predetermined.\textsuperscript{356}

John Sanders’ conclusion about Judas’s action depends in large measure on a linguistically flawed understanding of \textit{παραδιδόμι}. In claiming this term does not mean “betrayal,” Sanders seems to exhibit a lexical rigidity that fails to consider the contextual meaning of words.\textsuperscript{357} \textit{Παραδιδόμι} had a fairly wide semantic range and frequently referred to the handing over of a prisoner for the purpose of putting him or her to death.\textsuperscript{358} Jesus himself

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{353} Cf. Henri Blocher, \textit{Evil and the Cross} (Downer’s Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995).
\item \textsuperscript{354} Sanders, \textit{The God Who Risks}, 98-99.
\item \textsuperscript{355} \textit{Ibid.}, 98. See also William Klassen, \textit{Judas: Betrayer or Friend of Jesus?} (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1996).
\item \textsuperscript{356} Sanders, \textit{The God Who Risks}, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{357} See BDAG, 761-762.
\item \textsuperscript{358} H. Beck, “\textit{Paradidōmi},” \textit{New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology}, Colin Brown, ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999). Beck notes that this was the most frequent meaning operative in the New
understood that he would be delivered (παραδίδωμι) into human hands for this very purpose (Matthew 17:22; Mark 9:31; Luke 9:44; see discussion below). Furthermore, the gospels make clear that the Jewish leaders had plotted for some time to *kill* Jesus (Matthew 21:45-46; John 11:45-57); it is doubtful that Judas was unaware of this when he offered to deliver Jesus to them (Matthew 21:45-46; 26:14-16; Mark 14:10, 11; Luke 22:3-6).

Furthermore, Sanders’ interpretation does not take into consideration various scriptural comments concerning Judas’ character. Before going around Galilee (John 7:1), Jesus revealed that one of his followers was a “devil” (διάβολος, diabólos; 6:70). John did not leave the reader to speculate about whom Jesus was talking: “He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray him” (6:71). Later in the text, John records Judas’ objection as Mary anoints Jesus’ feet. Here John inserts another editorial comment, in this case revealing the true motivation behind the complaint: “[Judas] did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it” (12:6). Greed led Judas to pilfer the disciples’ treasury; perhaps it was the same greed that inspired Judas to deliver Jesus to those who meant to kill him.

As Jesus shares one last Passover with his disciples, he reveals to his disciples that one of them is going to betray him (John 13:21). The language with which John records Jesus’ statement is telling. The TNIV says that Jesus “testified” (εµαρτυρήσεν, hemartúresen) to the coming betrayal, properly indicating the force with which the revelation was made. In this context μαρτυρέω means, “to provide information about a person or an event concerning which the speaker has direct knowledge.” Jesus made a solemn declaration of Judas’ betrayal—not the *possibility* that Judas might betray, but the certainty that he would.

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360 It is plausible, since the price received for his betrayal was equivalent to approximately four month’s salary. (30 pieces of silver = 120 denarii. One denarius was the typical daily payment for laborers.)

Jesus gives Judas the sop, identifying him (perhaps only to Peter and John) as the betrayer. Though this gesture is rightly understood as an act of “supreme love,” it seems only to further harden Judas’ already treacherous heart. Satan enters Judas (perhaps indicating “total possession”), and Jesus urges Judas to go about his business “quickly” (13:27-28). Jesus knows full well what Judas is about to do (cf. 13:21); thus it is unlikely that his parting statement brings Judas “to a point of decision,” as Sanders suggests. The decision has already been made; Judas’ fate appears sealed. Yet Jesus’ final admonition to Judas also reveals who is in control of the events surrounding Jesus’ betrayal and death. Earlier Jesus declared that he would lay down his life of his own accord; no one could take it from him against his will (10:18). The betrayal and execution of the Messiah was not some unforeseen tragedy but the very reason Christ came to earth. In sending Judas on his way, Jesus may have been releasing him to do what he was destined to do as a part of God’s sovereign plan of redemption.

F. Jesus’ Prediction of Peter’s Denial and Other Events

Another key event the night Jesus was betrayed was his prediction of Peter’s denial. Jesus informed his disciples that none of them would stand by him when the moment of his betrayal came (Matthew 26:31). Peter, sure that Jesus was mistaken, swore his allegiance to the Messiah. Jesus’ response to Peter reveals more than just a good understanding of Peter’s character. The detail with which Jesus predicted Peter’s denial seems too great for this to be no more than another example of God’s ability to anticipate the future with good (but not infallible) accuracy. Jesus specifies both the number of times Peter will deny him and the span of time within which Peter’s denials will take place (26:34).

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363 The indicative form of the verb παραδιώκω may lend further support to this conclusion. For more on both παραδιώκω and μαρτυρέω, see Max Zerwick S.J. and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek New Testament* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1996), 329.

364 Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, 474. Had Jesus made his revelation to the entire group, some of the disciples’ belief that Judas left to buy more food or give something to the poor (13:29) would make little sense.


366 Ibid.


Given the specificity with which Jesus made this prediction, John Sanders acknowledges the possibility that Peter’s denial was foreordained by God to teach him a lesson “concerning the importance of spiritual preparedness.” However, such an explanation seems problematic for open theism, for in determining Peter’s denial God would necessarily trample on Peter’s free will; he would be, in effect, sovereignly willing that Peter sin against him. This is precisely the type of thing open theism strives to avoid.

Peter’s threefold denial is but one of Jesus’ predictions recorded in the gospels. Jesus predicts events both near and far with such confidence that he seems to know the future with exactitude. Robert Gundry gives a helpful summary of Jesus’ predictive abilities:

[Jesus] predicts small events as well as large. The disciples will find a colt. They will find it as soon as they enter a village. It will be male, tied, previously unsat upon. Someone may ask why they are untying it... Delicious detail. Jesus predicts the fate of the temple, the fate of the world, the fate of the elect, the coming of the Son of man—again with details galore: not one stone on another, wars, persecution, abomination of desolation, unprecedented tribulation, false christs, false prophets, celestial disasters...

The weight and detail of Jesus’ predictions in the gospels make it difficult to ignore the possibility that he knows (and even controls) the future.

G. The Messianic Mission

Focusing on the scene in Gethsemane, John Sanders questions the view that Jesus’ death on the cross was a foreordained certainty prior to the moment of his passion. Though Jesus has “repeatedly attempted to instruct his disciples about the particular path he, as Messiah, will take,” in the garden Jesus begins to entertain second thoughts. Jesus attempts to prevail upon God to change the script; through prayerful dialogue (Luke 22:42), both Father and Son “come to understand that there is no other way” but the cross. “Until this moment in history,” Sanders writes, “other routes were, perhaps, open.” This is so because only the incarnation—not the cross—was foreordained, according to Sanders.

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369 Gundry, Mark, 11.
371 Ibid., 100.
Several things in Scripture call Sanders’ view into question—the first of these is Jesus’ anticipation of his own death. To his credit, Sanders does not deny that Jesus tried to teach the disciples about the path he intended to take. However, Sanders seems to gloss over this important motif of the narrative all too quickly. In light of the many times Jesus predicts his death and the language with which he does so, these narratives arguably say something significant about the purpose of God in the death of his Son.

The anticipation of Messiah’s death is a major theme in each of the four gospels. Following Peter’s confession of Jesus’ messiahship, Matthew records that Jesus began to reveal his purpose to the disciples (ἵρξατο...δεικνύειν, herxato... deiknuein, “he began to make clear [or prove]”). (Matthew’s language indicates that what began in 16:21 was a process of making clear the divine plan.) His journey to Jerusalem, his suffering, his death and his resurrection on the third day—all were deemed necessary (δεί, dei, “it is necessary”) according to the divine plan. Hagner suggests that, “the verb δεί...points to nothing less than the will of God” as the determinative factor in Jesus’ destiny (cf. Matthew 26:54). The teaching of 16:21 is repeated at least two more times in Matthew (17:22-23; 20:17-19). Parallels can also be found in the other Synoptic gospels (Mark and Luke).

The specificity with which Jesus describes the fulfillment of his earthly ministry seems to indicate that the messianic mission was planned in careful detail. Matthew, Mark and Luke in particular note the following specific events, all of which are fulfilled in the story of Jesus’ passion:

- **Jesus must go to Jerusalem** (Matthew 16:21; 20:17; Mark 10:33; Luke 18:31).
- **Jesus will be betrayed** (Matthew 17:22; Mark 9:31; 10:33).
- **Jesus must suffer many things—ultimately to be rejected and condemned by the Jewish leaders** (Matthew 16:21; 20:17; Mark 8:31-32; 10:31).
- **Jesus will be killed** (Matthew 16:21; 17:22; 20:17; Mark 9:31; 10:31; Luke 18:32).

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373 Hagner, *Matthew 14–28*, 479
Jesus will be raised, specifically on the third day (Matthew 16:21; 17:22; 20:17; Mark 9:31; 10:31; Luke 18:32).

John also contributes to our understanding of Jesus’ destiny. First, the means of execution is anticipated in the imagery that Jesus uses to describe his death. “The Son of Man must be lifted up [ὑψωθῆναι, hupsothénai]” in order to prove that he is who he claims to be (John 3:14; 8:27). John’s use of υψωθῆναι, according to Carson, combines “the notion of being physically lifted up on the cross with the notion of exaltation.” In other words, these two ideas appear to be inseparable in Jesus’ mind, creating perhaps one of the greatest ironies in Scripture: The cross is the means by which Jesus will be exalted.

Second, John records that Jesus asserted his control over the events surrounding his death: “ ‘I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord’ ” (John 10:17b-18). It is the divine prerogative to do what must be done in Jesus’ life. Note that Jesus’ own words give the Sanhedrin what it needs to condemn him (Matthew 26:62-66). Based on Jesus’ statement in John 10, it seems plausible to suggest that God in the person of Jesus Christ sovereignly orchestrates the events culminating in the execution of Messiah—including the participation of various human agents—according to his sovereign will.

The Old Testament may also lend support to the view that Messiah’s crucifixion was planned well before its occurrence. Isaiah 52:13–53:12 almost certainly anticipates the messianic role. While other prophecies fulfilled in the New Testament are arguably typological rather than predictive (cf., e.g., Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15), Isaiah 52:13–53:12 seems to be more distinctly predictive. In any case, its language anticipates the Messiah’s suffering with striking detail:

- God’s “servant” (a term for the Messiah in Isaiah) will be “lifted up and highly exalted” (52:13)
- His form will be “marred” beyond recognition (52:14).
- He will “sprinkle many nations” (52:15).

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He will be “despised and rejected by others.” He will know “sorrow” and “suffering” (53:3).

- He will bear human infirmity and sorrow; he will be thought “stricken by God” (53:4).
- He will be “pierced for our transgressions...crushed for our iniquities” (53:5).
- He will bear our sin (53:6).
- He will suffer quietly (53:7).
- He will be regarded as a criminal (53:9).
- He will be like a “guilt offering” (53:10).
- He will ultimately be exalted (53:10).

Finally, Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 affirms God’s sovereign role in the events that surrounded Jesus’ death. According to Peter, Jesus was handed over to the people of Israel “by God’s deliberate plan and foreknowledge” (ὁρισμένη βουλή καὶ προγνώσει τοῦ θεοῦ, horisméne boulé kai prognósei tou theou, 2:42). In other words, the circumstances necessary for Jesus’ death were purposefully orchestrated by the predetermined will of God. In light of Jesus’ own understanding of his mission, it is arguably most accurate to conclude that God determined Jesus would be handed over for the specific purpose of his being crucified. The crucifixion is not merely one possible outcome of God’s “deliberate plan and foreknowledge”; it is more likely the purpose for which God’s plan unfolds.

Of course, Jesus’ agony in the garden of Gethsemane is genuine. His request—that the “hour [ὥρα, hora; in this context suggestive of Jesus’ destiny] might pass from him” (Mark 14:35)—is sincere. Three times he begs that the cup of God’s wrath be removed from him; yet each time Jesus prays in conjunction with this that God’s will be done (see Mark 14:32-42). That Jesus was fully human and thus in a position of submitting himself to God’s sovereign will should not be forgotten. In fact, his response to God’s will is instructive: There is nothing morally wrong with asking God for relief from suffering, so long as in the end we submit to his sovereign will for our lives (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:7b-9). Jesus’ request in the garden does not appear to have jeopardized

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God’s sovereign plan in the least. Indeed, Luke records that God sent “an angel from heaven” to strengthen Jesus for his task (Luke 22:43). God’s resolve to lead his Son to the cross is certain; he lovingly intervenes to ensure that his redemptive purposes are fulfilled.

**H. Summary**

In many ways, the story of Jesus as told in the Gospels seems to point clearly to God’s exercise of meticulous sovereignty within the context of redemptive history. Everything—from the virgin birth to the miracles of healing to Christ’s death and resurrection—seems to have been carefully planned in the counsel of the Father.

Furthermore, Jesus departed from the custom of his day in choosing individuals to be his followers (instead of waiting for them to choose him). He promised the crowd that he would preserve everyone the Father saw fit to give him. This theme of divine election continues throughout the New Testament. “God’s elect” are chosen according to the πρόγνωσις (prognosis, foreknowledge) of God (1 Peter 1:2). They are predestined by divine prerogative to conform to the likeness of God’s Son (Romans 8:29; cf. 9:14-16). The divine “prognosis” should not be confused with the modern sense of the English transliteration,\(^{378}\) when used of God, πρόγνωσις seems to indicate the predetermination according to his “omniscient wisdom and intention.”\(^{379}\) It appears to be on the basis of this προγνώσις that we have hope for salvation by God’s grace and power. On the basis of God’s sovereign involvement in redemptive history, we can be assured of his total victory and our final salvation.

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CONCLUSION

The question of God’s sovereignty is of profound importance to many believers; the passion with which evangelicals have responded to the emergence of open theism is all the evidence needed to prove this. Yet sometimes lost in the debate is the fact that proponents of open theism insist that they are simply trying to be more biblical in their theology. To be sure, various external factors usually contribute to the development of one’s theological assumptions; and open theism is no exception. Still, I am inclined to believe that open theism’s chief desire is to provide a biblical description of God, even though I disagree with the description offered.

In the process of reconstructing divine sovereignty, open theism claims to do what conventional theology supposedly cannot: interact with the whole narrative of Scripture and not merely those passages that conform to one’s presuppositional notions of the divine character. My goal has been to respond to this claim, questioning whether the narrative of Scripture can support the conventional view of a fully sovereign God.

It is my conclusion based on this study that the narrative can, in fact, support such a view of God’s sovereignty. It seems to me that one can find numerous indicators of God’s meticulous sovereignty when Scripture is read with respect for its historical, cultural and theological context. That is not to suggest that open theism has nothing to offer to our understanding of God. In contrast, I believe open theism has made the following valuable contributions worth noting:

1. Open theism encourages evangelicals to reaffirm the repugnance of evil. The danger of believing in God’s absolute sovereignty is that we grow complacent to the presence of “natural” and moral evil—both of which are the consequence of original sin and thus reprehensible to God.

2. Open theism takes seriously the emotions of God—e.g., his capacity to genuinely love human beings and to experience profound grief at our sin. God may have

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380 For example, John Sanders notes that the tragic death of his brother led him to question some of the traditional assumptions about God’s providence. Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 9.
been “bound only once,” but our sin and its consequences in some way cause God to “suffer” (cf. John 11:33, 38). We need not conclude on the basis of God’s transcendence that he is incapable of experiencing such emotion.

At the same time, I have attempted to question open theism’s interpretation of Scripture at several points in the narratives of Creation, Fall and Redemption. It is my belief that God exercises complete sovereignty through each of these narrative units. In creation God demonstrates his supremacy by giving life to all things. Scripture reveals God is both the giver and sustainer of life (Genesis 1:1–2:25; Psalm 39:9; Proverbs 14:27); in this way God continues to exercise meticulous sovereignty with respect to his creation. In the Fall—though its effect on creation is disastrous from a human standpoint—God appears to maintain perfect control of the cosmos, bringing judgment in accordance with his warning to Adam (Genesis 2:17) and launching a redemptive plan that had its origins “before the creation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4; cf. Hebrews 4:3; 1 Peter 1:20). God elects unremarkable individuals—Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Mary, Peter—to participate in his redemptive plan. Some who are chosen balk at their calling; others drop everything to follow. Either way they ultimately fulfill their mission, for God’s call is effectual. In the gospels, Jesus reveals that he will save and keep “all whom the Father gives” him (John 6:37). Even sickness has a purpose in God’s redemptive plan, and the God who can heal all sickness repeatedly demonstrates his mastery over both nature and humanity. Taken as a whole, the Bible seems to describe God as one who is fully sovereign over the affairs of his creation.

Two issues, however, remain unresolved. First, how are we to reconcile the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom? In chapter three, I challenged the libertarian understanding of freedom embraced by open theism. Nevertheless, I do not reject the concept of freedom outright. As creatures who bear God’s image, we are more than robots; humans have both volitional capacity and moral responsibility. In my opinion, efforts to logically reconcile such freedom with God’s absolute sovereignty fall short. Yet this tension should not necessarily lead us to reject one for the other, as open theism rejects meticulous

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381 *Bound Only Once* is one of the books written in critique of open theism.
382 Contrast Anselm, “Prosologion,” *Anselm of Canterbury*, vol. 1 (trans. Tasper Hawkins and Herbert Richardson; Toronto: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1974), 97-98. Anselm did not attribute emotional experience to God. For example, when God grants mercy, according to Anselm, we feel the effects of that mercy, but God does not.
sovereignty in favor of human freedom. As evangelical Christians, we must all live with a degree of tension in our theology, whatever our doctrinal distinctives may be.

Open theism, however, cannot tolerate this tension, calling for strict “conceptual intelligibility.” Sanders writes, “If a concept is contradictory, it fails a key test for public intelligibility… If concepts integral to the model are mutually inconsistent, the coherence of the model is called into question.” Open theists reject God’s meticulous sovereignty partly on the basis of its logical tension with human freedom. However, it seems that open theism has selectively applied the principle of “conceptual intelligibility.” If non-contradiction is “a key test for public intelligibility,” then what are we to do with doctrines like the Trinity and the full humanity and divinity of Christ? Both are paradoxical. The former—on which Clark Pinnock bases his presentation of open theism—declares that God is at once three persons yet one God. The latter insists that full divinity and fully humanity reside within a single, undivided person. These paradoxical doctrines are embraced by all evangelicals, including open theists. So why is the paradox of human freedom and divine sovereignty singled out for rejection? If it is because the notion of paradox is intolerable, then open theists ought to insist that these other paradoxical doctrines be done away with immediately.

If, on the other hand, the notion of paradox is a necessary part of Christian faith, then there is no reason to discard either human freedom or divine sovereignty, unless our reading of Scripture demands it. In my opinion, based on careful study of the metanarrative, Scripture makes no such demand.

Second, how are we to respond to charges that open theism is a heretical theology? Though I believe that open theism has serious theological and hermeneutical flaws, I have stopped short of calling it heresy for two reasons. First, it seems appropriate that such determinations be made by the church and not by an individual. Second, before passing judgment one must consider the many core doctrines embraced by open and conventional theists alike: the Trinity; God’s ontological independence from the cosmos; creatio ex nihilo; original sin; Jesus’ full humanity and divinity; his sinless life, atoning death, victorious resurrection and second coming; the inspiration and authority of Scripture, etc. While these

affirmations may not preclude charges of heresy, they should cause evangelicals to give pause before making any such indictment.

In conclusion, evangelicals must be circumspect in their response to open theism. Nevertheless, this charity does not preclude one from staking a position. I myself remain convinced that the narrative of Scripture supports a conventional understanding of God’s sovereignty.
APPENDIX

THE CONCEPT OF GOD’S WILL IN SCRIPTURE

This study examines the biblical concept of God’s will. References to God’s will can be classified under one of two categories: God’s sovereign will and his moral will. The four English words commonly used to refer to God’s will are purpose, plan, counsel and will.

1. The will of God in the Old Testament

Old Testament references to God’s will are concentrated in the poetic and prophetic books. All such references refer to some aspect of God’s sovereign or moral will. References to God’s sovereign will are further classified as follows: promises to punish evildoers, affirmations of God’s power over creation (including the plans of people), declarations of God’s provision in general and statements specifically about God’s provision of salvation.

References to God’s moral will are less frequent but more homogenous. Adherence to God’s moral will is always connected to the Law—the means by which his moral will is revealed. The Psalms reveal that meditating upon the Law is the key to knowing (and doing) God’s moral will.

God’s sovereign will

a. To punish evil

- Isaiah 14:24-27; 19:12, 17; 23:9; 46:11; Jeremiah 49:20; 50:45

  God announces his purpose to judge Assyria, Egypt, Tyre, Edom and Babylon.

  These passages stress the Lord’s active role in bringing judgment. In Isaiah 19:14,
God is credited for confounding the wise men of Egypt with “a spirit of dizziness” (cf. God’s proclamation that he will harden Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus 7:3).
• Isaiah 28:29; Jeremiah 4:28; 26:3; Lamentations 2:8

*God determines to judge Israel and Judah.* Isaiah 28:29 asserts God’s justice with respect to his plan to judge Israel, noting that he is “wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom.”

• Isaiah 5:18-20

*Isaiah condemns the folly of those who mock God’s plans to bring judgment upon evildoers.*

• Isaiah 25:1

*Isaiah praises God for carrying out his sovereign plan to deliver the oppressed through the judgment of the wicked.*

While God’s plans to punish evil demonstrate his sovereignty, these plans are not immutable in the strictest sense. On the surface, Jeremiah 4:28 appears to suggest otherwise: “Because of this the earth shall mourn, and the heavens above grow black; for I have spoken, I have purposed; I have not relented nor will I turn back.”

However, in 18:7-8 God declares, “At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring upon it.”

As Jeremiah 18 indicates (cf. Jeremiah 26:3), the warning of coming punishment is usually accompanied by the invitation to repent. Such warnings constitute conditional prophecies, but they do not limit God’s sovereignty. Should the objects of (potential) judgment repent, God relents not because he is coerced to, but because he has previously promised to do so. The possibility of relenting is included within God’s *original* plan. Whatever the response of the people, God’s absolute sovereignty remains unaffected, as Jeremiah 18:6 suggests: “Just like the clay in the potter’s hand, so you are in my hand.”

b. *To govern the affairs of his creation*

• Psalm 33:11; Proverbs 19:21

*God’s purposes, not human plans, ultimately govern the course of history.* These passages emphasize the superiority of God’s plans to those made by human beings.
When the plans of people conflict with the plans of God, God’s purposes prevail (cf. Pr. 16:1-3, 9).

- Isaiah 46:10
  The author reveals God’s plan for the future (to sustain Ephraim; 46:3-4), assuring the reader that the divine purpose will not be thwarted. Verse 10 indicates not only that God knows the future, but also he directs it according to his sovereign purpose. In the larger context, God’s ability to announce what the future holds and then bring it about in keeping with his word is what sets him apart from the idols worshiped throughout Israel—idols that were nothing more than the wood and stone from which they were carved (cf. Isaiah 44:6-20; 48:1-6).

- Jeremiah 32:19
  Even as Judah is being invaded, Jeremiah—directed by God—buys a field to symbolize the temporary nature of God’s judgment upon his people: “Houses, fields and vineyards will again be bought in this land” (v 15). Responding to this divine promise, Jeremiah praises God for his sovereign purposes, acknowledging that even punishment brought by the Lord is good.

- Psalm 103:21
  Psalm 103 praises God for salvation, which only he as sovereign ruler of all things can provide (v 19). Angels are identified in verse 21 as agents who carry out God’s sovereign will.

c. To provide for his people
   - Psalm 73:24
This passage does not speak of some individual will in God’s mind but rather of his sovereign will. The writer of Psalm 73 struggles to accept the prosperity of the wicked (v 3), leading him to question the value of maintaining his own purity (v 13). However, the psalmist remembers the final destiny of the wicked (v 17-19) and acknowledges that God sustains him even as the wicked prosper (v 23-26). As a child of God, the writer is destined for eternal sustenance in the presence of God’s glory (24 and 26). Verse 24 proclaims how God provides for the psalmist’s needs, guides him to glory and ultimately brings justice to the wicked.

d. To accomplish redemption
- Psalm 103:7
Psalm 103 praises God for his willingness to forgive sin. Compassion and grace characterize God’s sovereign ways, which are made known to Israel (v. 7). This passage intimates God’s sovereign plan to forgive the sins of his people.

God’s moral will
- Psalm 107:11
This passage refers to the punishment some have endured for ignoring God’s “counsel.” In this case, “the counsel of the Most High” refers to God’s moral will; this phrase is a literary parallel to “the words of God” (i.e., God’s law).

- Psalm 40:8; 143:10
The writer desires to do God’s will. In both contexts, the Law (i.e., God’s moral will) is in view. In Psalm 40:8, God’s will is the “law [which is] written on my heart.” In Psalm 143, the writer seeks guidance from God and deliverance from
his enemies. Here, the psalmist understands that the guidance he needs is to be found in the Law, God’s revealed word (v. 10). His prayer in verse 10 is almost identical to the prayer of the psalmist in 119:12: “teach me your decrees.”

2. Septuagint

In the Septuagint, βουλή occurs more than 100 times in reference to God’s will. By contrast, θέλημα occurs about 25 times. The verbal forms of these terms, βουλομαι and θέλω have a more even distribution.385

While βουλή can mean “advice,” this usage is generally not found in the LXX or the New Testament.386 Specifically, βουλή is present in Isaiah 5:19-20, 19:17, 25:1, 28:29; and Jeremiah 50:45, describing God’s sovereign plans to punish evildoers. Βουλή is also used to describe God’s governance over the affairs of his creation in Psalm 33:11, Proverbs 19:21, Isaiah 46:10 and Jeremiah 32:19. The translator of Psalm 73:24 chose βουλη to describe God’s will to provide for his people. In contrast, only one of the previously cited passages uses βουλή to describe God’s moral will (Psalm 107:11). Βουλή is generally represented in English as counsel, purpose, or plan.

Θέλημα is used to describe both God’s moral and sovereign will. The LXX renderings of Psalms 40:8 and 143:10 use Θέλημα to express the writer’s desire to know and obey God’s law (i.e., his moral will). In Psalms 103:7 and 21, Θέλημα is used to describe (a) God’s sovereign will with respect to his redemptive purposes and (b) his sovereign rule over creation, respectively.

3. **Extra-biblical sources**

Outside the Bible, Θέλημα sometimes means council or advice. Such usage has been noted in writings originating in Egypt.387 Θέλημα on the other hand is virtually “unknown outside of biblical and ecclesiastical writings.”388

4. **The will of God in the New Testament**

As in the Septuagint, Θέλημα and Θέλημα are key words for the will of God throughout the New Testament. However, three relevant distinctions of terminology are worth noting. First, θέλημα replaces boulhν as the standard word for designating God’s will, occurring 62 times.389 Second, θουλή is used exclusively in reference to God’s sovereign will. Third, in a few key passages the New Testament uses προθεσις to designate God’s sovereign redemptive will.

In the New Testament, references to God’s sovereign, redemptive will and to his moral will dominate. Other references to God’s sovereign will focus on his dealings with his people.

**Βουλή—God’s sovereign will**

a. *To accomplish redemption*

- Acts 2:23, 4:28
  
  *Peter and other believers declare that Christ’s death was foreordained according to God’s sovereign purpose.*

- Romans 9:19; Ephesians 1:11
  
  *These texts emphasize the predestination of believers to salvation according to God’s purpose. Romans 9:19 addresses those who object to the irresistibility of*  

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387 Ibid.
388 Ibid, 286.
God’s will; these dissenters are compared to a clay pot that complains to the potter about its ordained shape or function. Ephesians 1:11 incorporates boulhv, qevlhma and provqesi” in one passage, reminding the reader that all God’s plans come to fruition just as he intends.

- Hebrews 6:17
The writer indicates that God’s redemptive purpose is “unchanging.”

b. To govern the affairs of his people

- Acts 13:36
Paul notes that David died once he had fulfilled God’s purpose for his life, suggesting that God determines the span of one’s life according to his sovereign purpose (cf. 1 Samuel 2:6-7).

Θέλημα—God’s sovereign will

a. To accomplish redemption

- Matthew 6:10
Jesus instructs his followers to pray for God’s will to be done. In light of the immediately preceding petitions—for God’s name to be hallowed and for his kingdom to come—this prayer likely has redemptive connotations.

- Matthew 18:14
Jesus assures his listeners that God—in keeping with his sovereign, redemptive plan—will lose none of those whom he has predestined unto salvation.
• Matthew 26:42; Luke 22:42; John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38
  *Jesus demonstrates his submission to God’s redemptive will for the duration of his life on earth.*

• Galatians 1:4
  *This passage indicates that Christ’s sacrifice took place according to the will of God.*

• Ephesians 1:5, 11
  *Predestination of some to salvation takes place according to God’s predetermined will.*

• Acts 22:14; 1 Corinthians 1:1; 2 Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; 2 Timothy 1:1
  *Paul asserts his calling as an apostle. The circumstances of his calling are unique in two ways. First, Paul experienced a supernatural call on the road to Damascus. Second, Paul was called to play a special (i.e., apostolic) role in God’s redemptive plan.*

  **b. To govern the affairs of his people**

• Acts 21:14
  *The Caesarean believers plead with Paul not to leave for Jerusalem. When they are unable to dissuade Paul, they simply say, “The Lord’s will be done,” committing Paul to God’s sovereign will and resigning themselves to the fact that it may be God’s will for Paul to suffer.*

• Romans 1:10; 15:32
Paul’s prayer is for God to open a door for him to visit the church in Rome. Paul is referring to God’s sovereign guidance, not some individual will. Paul has already planned to visit Rome; he is not praying to “find out” if it is God’s will for him to do so. He is simply praying that God will enable Paul to carry out his plans.

- James 4:15
  James warns believers against presuming about tomorrow, given the uncertainty (from humanity’s perspective) about the future. With that in mind, James admonishes believers to say of their plans, “‘If it is the Lord’s will [qelhvsh/]...’” James indicates that God holds the future in his sovereign hands.

- 1 Peter 3:17
  Peter affirms that suffering is a part of God’s sovereign will for the believer.

Θέλημα—God’s moral will

- Matthew 7:21; 12:50; Mark 3:32
  Submission to God’s moral will is a sign of belonging to God.

- John 7:17
  Jesus declares that those who live according to God’s moral will recognize that his teaching is consistent with the Hebrew Scriptures. In other words, those who faithfully meditate on the Law acknowledge Jesus as the fulfillment of the Law.

- John 9:31
  A blind man healed by Jesus affirms that only one who lives according to God’s moral will can do the things done by Jesus.
• Romans 2:18

_Those Jews who rely on the Law are without excuse before God because they knew God’s moral will—that is, the Law._

• Romans 12:2

_This is not a reference to God’s individual will. Romans 12:1-2 calls people to a morally transformed life—one in which believers prove the goodness of God’s moral will, in contrast to “the pattern of this world.”_

• 2 Corinthians 8:5

_Context does not suggest that the Macedonian believers prayed to “discover” God’s will. Rather, the text emphasizes that these believers went “above and beyond” their reasonable service, looking carefully after the interests of others (cf. Phil. 2:4). In their giving, the Macedonians served as an example to the other churches._

• Ephesians 5:17; 6:6

_Paul urges the Ephesians to submit themselves to God’s moral will—making the most of every moment, avoiding drunkenness, and obeying their masters at all times._

• Colossians 1:9; 4:12

_Paul and Epaphras pray for the Colossians to be filled with the knowledge of God’s will. In the context, God’s will refers to a certain manner of conduct; it is his moral will (cf. 1:10-12)._

• 1 Thessalonians 5:18

_Paul outlines God’s moral expectation that his people have thankful attitudes._

• Hebrews 13:21
The writer prays that God will equip his people with the necessary tools for doing God’s will. In light of the theological context of Hebrews, it is likely that the writer has in view God’s moral will for the believer to persevere in faithfulness to him.

- **1 Peter 2:15**
  In keeping with God’s moral will, the believer should do good, silencing Christianity’s detractors.

- **1 John 2:17**
  Obedience to God’s moral will is contrasted with love for the sinful things of the world.

**Πρόθεσις—God’s sovereign will**

a. To accomplish redemption
   - **Romans 8:28**
     According to the context, the purpose according to which God calls the believer is redemptive in nature. Specifically, that purpose is to call, justify and glorify those who have been predestined.

   - **Romans 9:11**
     Paul defends the concept of divine election using the example of Jacob and Esau, noting that “God’s purpose in election” was responsible for events unfolding as they did.

   - **Ephesians 1:11; 3:11**
     Paul declares that redemption and the proclamation of God’s wisdom have taken place according to God’s sovereign plan.
• 2 Timothy 1:9

Paul reminds Timothy that individuals are saved not because of their own merit but because of God’s “purpose and grace” (emphasis added).

5. Conclusion

Both Old and New Testaments indicate that God’s will takes two forms: his sovereign will and his moral will. In the Old Testament, God’s sovereign will is identified especially with the punishment of evildoers and God’s rule over creation (including people). Within the context of his sovereign will, God interacts meaningfully with people, as indicated by his promise to relent from plans to punish the wicked should they repent. Even in such cases, however, God’s sovereignty is the determining factor in what happens to his creation.

The New Testament also distinguishes between God’s sovereign will and his moral will. However, the New Testament writers especially emphasize God’s sovereign will as it relates to the plan of redemption accomplished in the person and work of Jesus Christ. With the formation of a new religious community came the need for a set of ethical guidelines to govern the life of the church. Hence, the New Testament also gives significant attention to God’s moral will.

The above passages describing God’s moral will seem to indicate that it can be resisted. However, those texts specifically describing God’s sovereign will do not appear to indicate the possibility that it can be thwarted.
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**Articles**


Lexicons and language tools


Other resources


