

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Divine Sovereignty—Omniscience, Inerrancy, And Open Theism: An Evaluation

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When one thinks of the topics that create friction among Christians, the subject of divine sovereignty is probably high on the list. We all have experienced heated discussions over the nature of divine sovereignty, especially as it relates to the issues of divine election and salvation. Many Christian people, even seminary students, have expressed to me time and again that they wish the subject would somehow disappear. But that is hardly likely, since the subject of divine sovereignty is so foundational to one's entire theology and praxis.



In fact, within evangelical theology today, the perennial polemics over divine sovereignty-human freedom are heating up more than ever, given the rise of the view entitled “open theism.” At the heart of the open view proposal is a reformulation of the doctrine of divine sovereignty and omniscience that has massive implications for how we think of God and his relation to the world.<sup>1</sup> That is why, given the recent trends, it seems unlikely that discussion over the sovereignty-freedom relationship or foreknowledge-freedom tension will fade into the background. Instead, the subject, because it is so critical, must be revisited once again

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on “open theism” is growing by the month. For some helpful statements of the view see Clark Pinnock *et al.*, *The Openness of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994); David Basinger, *The Case for Free Will Theism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000); Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). For a sympathetic, yet critical summary of open theism see Terrance Tiessen, *Providence and Prayer* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000) 71-118. For various critiques of open theism see Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2000); John M. Frame, *No Other God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2001).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

with a renewed sense of vigor and determination, as we seek to test our proposals, whether new or old, against the standard of God's Word.

The goal of this paper is to do just that, but not in the typical way of evaluating this issue. Often our discussions of divine sovereignty, omniscience-human freedom merely collapse into the age-old Calvinist and Arminian debates over divine election, free will, and the nature of human depravity. No doubt these debates are important, and they must be handled with care and faithfulness to the biblical text. However, what is sometimes lost in these discussions is the fact that one's view of God and his relation to the world has massive implications for one's *whole* theology, not simply for issues of soteriology. Theology, as J. I. Packer reminds us, is a "seamless robe, a circle within which everything links up with everything else through its common grounding in God."<sup>2</sup> Theological doctrines, in other words, are much more organically related than we often realize, and that is why a reformulation in one area of doctrine inevitably affects other areas of our theology. This is important to remember, especially in evaluating old and new proposals regarding the doctrine of God.

In this regard, there are at least two complementary ways to evaluate theological proposals. First, does the proposal in question do justice to *all* of Scripture? After doing all the hard exegetical work and seeking to relate texts with other texts into a coherent reading of the canon, any theological proposal may be evaluated as to whether it does justice to all of the textual data. But there is also a second and complementary way to evaluate theological proposals. And it is this: Is the proposal, along with its implications and entailments, consistent with other theological doctrines, especially with those doctrines that we consider more central to our theological system? If the answer is yes to both of these ways, then we may be assured that our theological proposal is on track and warranted. However, if our answer is negative on both counts, then it should encourage us to reject the proposal or, at least, rethink it through very carefully before embracing it as a correct view. In this paper, I want to apply the latter option to the theological proposal of open theism. In particular, I want to investigate whether the open theist construal of the divine sovereignty-omniscience and human freedom relationship will be able to support a high view of Scripture as reflected in the doctrine of inerrancy as represented by the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS).<sup>3</sup> In other words, granting the

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<sup>2</sup> J. I. Packer, "Encountering Present-Day Views of Scripture," in *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (ed. James M. Boice; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 61.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper I am taking "a high view of Scripture" and the doctrine of inerrancy as my given. By the phrase "high view of Scripture" I am referring to the orthodox, historic view of Scripture held by the church throughout the ages, at least up until the present time. This is also the view of Scripture that is endorsed by the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS). For a sample defense of this view of Scripture see the following two works edited by D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge, *Scripture and Truth* (Grand

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

open theist's construal of divine sovereignty and omniscience, what, then, are the logical entailments of such a position for our belief in the inerrancy of Scripture? Will the openness proposal, at the end of the day, uphold or undermine our view that Scripture is nothing less than God's Word written, the product of God's mighty action through the Word and by the Holy Spirit whereby human authors freely wrote exactly what God intended to be written, without error?<sup>4</sup>

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How do I propose to carry out my investigation? I will do so in two main steps. First, I will outline and describe the open theist construal of divine sovereignty, omniscience, and human freedom. Second, I will attempt to evaluate whether the openness proposal is supportive of or detrimental to the doctrine of inerrancy in relation to the specific issues of a concursive theory of inspiration and the phenomena of predictive prophecy. I will finish with three concluding reflections.

## I. The Openness Proposal

What exactly is the openness proposal in regard to the relationship between divine sovereignty, omniscience, and human freedom? Probably the best place to begin is to define clearly what open theists mean by human freedom before we turn to how they view the divine sovereignty-omniscience and human freedom relationship.

### 1. Human freedom.

In the current philosophical and theological literature there are two basic views of human freedom which are primarily discussed and adopted—an indeterministic notion referred to in various ways, such as libertarian free will or incompatibilism, and a deterministic notion referred to as compatibilism or soft determinism.<sup>5</sup> Open theism strongly endorses the former rather than the latter. It is important to be clear as to what this view of freedom

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Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) and *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986). One may also refer to the number of books published in the late 1970s and early 1980s by the ICBI (International Council for Biblical Inerrancy).

<sup>4</sup> This view of Scripture is what Kevin J. Vanhoozer calls the "Received View." See his article, "God's Mighty Speech-Acts: The Doctrine of Scripture Today" in *A Pathway Into the Holy Scriptures* (ed. Philip E. Satterthwaite and David F. Wright; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 143-81.

<sup>5</sup> Scripture does not precisely define the nature of human freedom, but philosophers and theologians discuss it. As stated, there are two main notions of freedom—libertarianism and compatibilism. These two conceptions of human freedom clearly contradict one another, but both are possible views of freedom in the sense that there is no logical contradiction in affirming either view. Supporting the notion that both views of freedom are coherent and defensible is Thomas Flint, "Two Accounts of Providence," in *Divine and Human Action* (ed. Thomas V. Morris; Ithaca: Cornell University, 1988) 177-79. Ultimately the view of freedom that one ought to embrace should be the view that best fits the biblical data, not our pre-conceived notions of what human freedom is or ought to be.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

is, since, as we shall see, it has dramatic implications for how the open theist construes the divine sovereignty-omniscience and human freedom relationship.

What, then, do philosophers and theologians mean by the concept of a libertarian view of freedom? Simply stated, the most basic sense of this view is that a person's act is free, if it is not causally determined. For libertarians this does not mean that our actions are random or arbitrary. Reasons and causes play upon the will as one chooses, but none of them is *sufficient* to incline the will decisively in one direction or another. Thus, a person could always have chosen otherwise than he did. David Basinger states it this way: for a person to be free with respect to performing an action, he must have it within his power "to choose to perform action A or choose not to perform action A. Both A and not A could actually occur; which will actually occur has not yet been determined."<sup>6</sup>

This view of freedom is set over against a compatibilist or soft determinist view.<sup>7</sup> In a compatibilist approach, human actions are viewed as causally determined, yet free. In other words, in contrast to a libertarian view, a compatibilist view of freedom perceives the human will as decisively and *sufficiently* inclined toward one option as opposed to another, yet it is still free as long as the following requirements are met: "(1) The immediate cause of the action is a desire, wish, or intention internal to the agent, (2) no external event or circumstances compels the action to be performed, and (3) the agent could have acted differently if he had chosen to."<sup>8</sup> If these three conditions are met, then even though human actions are determined, they may still be considered free. John Feinberg summarizes this view well when he states, "If the agent acts in accord with causes and reasons that serve as a sufficient condition for his doing the act, and if the causes do not force him to act contrary to his wishes, then a soft determinist would say that he acts

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<sup>6</sup> David Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," *RelS* 22 (1986) 416. Also see William Hasker, *Metaphysics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1983) 32-44; Ledger Wood, "Indeterminism," *Dictionary of Philosophy* (ed. Dagobert Runes; Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1983) 159; Michael Peterson *et al.*, *Reason and Religious Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 59-61; Thomas Talbott, "Indeterminism and Chance Occurrences," *The Personalist* 60 (1979) 254.

<sup>7</sup> Even though compatibilism or soft determinism is a view of human freedom that fits under the broad category of determinism, it is important to distinguish it from the concept of "hard" determinism found in the natural sciences and from the concept of fatalism. For more on these distinctions see John S. Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," in *Predestination and Free Will* (ed. David Basinger and Randall Basinger; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1986) 21-26 and *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001) 625-42; Richard Taylor, "Determinism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (ed. Paul Edwards; New York: Macmillan, 1967) 2.359-73. For more on compatibilism in general see Paul Helm, *Eternal God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988) 157-58 and *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994).

<sup>8</sup> Michael Peterson *et al.*, *Reason & Religious Belief* 59. Also see Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things" 26-28.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

freely.”<sup>9</sup> Open theists generally reject this view of freedom, and they do so quite strongly.<sup>10</sup>

## 2. Divine Sovereignty And Human Freedom.

How, Then, Does Open Theism Conceive Of The Divine Sovereignty-Human Freedom Relationship Given Its Commitment To Libertarianism? How Do Open Theists View The Relationship Between A Libertarian View Of Human Freedom And God’s Sovereign Rule Over The Affairs Of Humanity? Most Open Theists, If Not All Of Them, Tend To “Limit” God’s Sovereignty In Some Sense. Now It Must Quickly Be Added That By The Use Of The Word “Limit” I Am Not Necessarily Using The Word In A Pejorative Or Negative Sense. Instead, It Is Being Used In The Sense That God Freely Chooses To Limit Himself By Virtue Of The Fact That He Has Chosen To Create A Certain Kind Of World, That Is, A World That Contains Human Beings With Libertarian Freedom. In This Sense, Then, “Limit” Does Not Refer To A Weakness Or Imperfection In God. Rather, It Refers To A Self-Imposed Limitation That Is Part Of His Plan, Not A Violation Of It.<sup>11</sup>

But it must still be asked: How does God’s creation of people with libertarian freedom limit his sovereignty? What exactly is the nature of God’s sovereign rule according to open theism? David Basinger states the limitation well when he acknowledges that open theists are quite willing to admit that a sovereign God “cannot create a co-possible set of free moral agents without also bringing about the possibility that states of affairs will occur which God does not desire but cannot prohibit.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, this particular proposal of the nature of divine sovereignty entails that God cannot guarantee that what he decides will be carried out. Of course, the important word here is “guarantee.” Given the open theist’s view of human freedom, it is not possible to affirm “that the exercise of the gift of freedom is *controlled* by God.”<sup>13</sup> Clark Pinnock states it this way: “What God wants to happen does not always come to pass on account of human freedom.... There is no blueprint that governs everything that happens, it is a real historical project that does

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<sup>9</sup> John S. Feinberg, “Divine Causality and Evil: Is There Anything Which God Does Not Do?” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 16 (1987) 400.

<sup>10</sup> See for example, Sanders, *God Who Risks* 220–24; Basinger, *Case for Free Will Theism* 21–37.

<sup>11</sup> On the issue of “limit” in regard to divine sovereignty see the helpful article by John M. Frame, “The Spirit and the Scriptures,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* 217–35. For an example of the outworking of this view in relation to divine sovereignty and libertarianism see Jack Cottrell, “The Nature of Divine Sovereignty,” in *The Grace of God and the Will of Man: The Case for Arminianism* (ed. Clark H. Pinnock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 108–10.

<sup>12</sup> David Basinger, “Human Freedom and Divine Providence: Some New Thoughts on an Old Problem,” *RelS* 15 (1979) 496.

<sup>13</sup> William Hasker, “God the Creator of Good and Evil?” in *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations* (ed. Thomas F. Tracy; University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1994) 139.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

not proceed smoothly but goes through twists and turns.... There is no unconditional guarantee of success because there are risks for God and the creature."<sup>14</sup>

At this point, it might be helpful to illustrate the openness proposal of divine sovereignty by referring to the work of Clark Pinnock. Pinnock admits that, as creator, God is unquestionably the superior power. For example, God has the power to exist and the power to control all things. But almightiness, according to Pinnock, is not the whole story. As Pinnock states,

Though no power can stand against him, God wills the existence of creatures with the power of self-determination. This means that God is a superior power who does not cling to his right to dominate and control but who voluntarily gives creatures room to flourish. By inviting them to have dominion over the world (for example), God willingly surrenders power and makes possible a partnership with the creature.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, due to God's own free choice to create creatures with libertarian freedom, God limits himself. But, as Pinnock states, this is not to be seen as a limitation "imposed from without"; it is a self-limitation.<sup>16</sup> In fact, Pinnock does not view this self-limitation of God as a "weakness," since, as he argues, it requires more power to rule over an undetermined world than it does over a determined one. But as a result of God's own self-limitation, it does entail that God is a "risk-taker."

What exactly does this mean? In the end, it means that God must respond and adapt to surprises and to the unexpected. As Pinnock states, "God sets goals for creation and redemption and realizes them ad hoc in history. If Plan A fails, God is ready with Plan B."<sup>17</sup> Thus, says Pinnock, because of God's creation of human beings with libertarian freedom, the sovereign God delegates power to the creature, making himself vulnerable. Sovereignty does not mean that nothing can go contrary to God's will, but that God is able to deal with any circumstances that may arise. As Pinnock asserts, "by his [God's] decision to create a world like ours, God showed his willingness to take risks and to work with a history whose outcome he does not wholly decide."<sup>18</sup> Hence, to a large extent, reality is "open" rather than closed. For Pinnock and other open theists this ultimately means that "genuine novelty can appear in history which cannot be predicted even by God. If the creature has been given the ability to decide how some things will turn out,

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<sup>14</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 44–45.

<sup>15</sup> Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God* 113.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. For a further development of this theme of divine risk-taking see Sanders's, *The God Who Risks*.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 116.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

then it cannot be known infallibly ahead of time how they will turn out. It implies that the future is really ‘open’ and not available to exhaustive foreknowledge even on the part of God.”<sup>19</sup> This last observation leads us to our next point of discussion, namely that of the openness view of divine omniscience.

### 3. Divine Omniscience And Human Freedom.

Traditionally, Christian Theologians And Philosophers Have Sought To Maintain That God Has Complete And Infallible Knowledge Of Everything Past, Present, And Future, And Necessarily So. As Thomas Morris States,

Not only is God omniscient, he is *necessarily omniscient*—it is impossible that his omniscience collapse, fail, or even waver. He is, as philosophers nowadays often say, omniscient in *every possible world*. That is to say, he is actually omniscient, and there is no possible, complete and coherent story about any way things could have gone (no “possible world”) in which God lacks this degree of cognitive excellence.<sup>20</sup>

However, as has long been discussed in the history of theology, this view of God’s omniscience seems to generate a very thorny problem, namely, how can we possibly be thought to be free in our actions if God knows exactly how we will act on every occasion in the future. Thomas Morris poses the problem in this way, “If God already knows exactly how we *shall* act, what else can we possibly do? We must act in that way. We cannot diverge from the path that he sees we shall take. We cannot prove God wrong. He is necessarily omniscient. Divine foreknowledge thus seems to preclude genuine alternatives, and thus genuine freedom in the world.”<sup>21</sup> This is what is known as the foreknowledge-freedom problem.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge,” in *Predestination and Free Will* 150.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Morris, *Our Idea of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 87. Morris clarifies what he means by this on page 88. He argues that to say “God is omniscient” does not merely assert a necessity *de dicto*, i.e. God knows all true propositions and none that are false, but also a necessity *de re*, i.e. God has perfect personal knowledge of all things. In other words, “not only is omniscience necessary for divinity, divinity is a necessary or essential property of any individual who has it ... the property of being God is best thought of as a necessary or essential property. An individual who is God does not just happen to have that status. It is not a property he could have done without.... Omniscience is thus not only a necessary condition of deity, it is a necessary or essential property for any individual who is God. No literally divine person is even possibly vulnerable to ignorance.”

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

<sup>22</sup> For the basic argument of the foreknowledge-freedom problem see Morris, *Our Idea of God* 91: (1)God’s beliefs are infallible. Thus, (2)For any event *x*, if God believes in advance that *x* will occur, then no one is in a position to prevent *x*. (3)For any event *x*, if no one is in a position to prevent *x*, then no one is free

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Now it is at this point that open theists offer a solution to the foreknowledge-freedom problem that is logically consistent, yet a departure from traditional Christian belief. Their view is known as “presentism.” Presentism strongly insists that God knows everything there is to know—God is truly omniscient.<sup>23</sup> But then presentism adds this very critical point: it is precisely future free actions of people that are impossible to know. Given libertarian freedom, they insist, it is impossible for anyone, including God himself, truly to know what people will do since there are no antecedent sufficient conditions which decisively incline a person’s will in one direction over another. Thus, in upholding a libertarian view of human freedom, open theism denies that God can know the future free actions of human beings.<sup>24</sup>

What are some of the implications of such a view? As has already been stated, the God of open theism is a risk-taker.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly, the implication is not only that God lacks exact and infallible knowledge of the contingent future, but also that, as David Basinger argues, “It can no longer be said that God is working out his ideal, preordained plan. Rather, God may well find himself disappointed in the sense that this world may fall short of that ideal world God wishes were coming about.”<sup>26</sup>

Does this then mean that open theists also believe that God’s *ultimate* plans will not come to pass? The answer is no. Open theists argue that, even though God does not have exhaustive knowledge of future contingents, he is still God. And given his familiarity with present causal tendencies and his clear grasp of his own providential designs, God is almost “sure” about how the future will turn out even though the future remains open. Richard Rice explains it this way:

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with respect to  $x$ . (4)For every event  $x$  that ever occurs, God believes in advance that it will occur. Therefore, (5)No one distinct from God is free with respect to any event. And so, (6)Human free will is a complete illusion.

<sup>23</sup> In this regard, listen to the definition of omniscience given by Richard Swinburne, a proponent of present knowledge, when he states, “omniscience is knowledge of everything true which is logically possible to know” (*The Coherence of Theism* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1977] 175).

<sup>24</sup> For a further description of “presentism” see William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God* 136–38 and 150–51 and *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1989) 186-90, as well as the article by Clark Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge” 143–62, and Richard Rice, *God’s Foreknowledge and Man’s Free Will* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1985). Also see David Basinger, “Divine Control and Human Freedom: Is Middle Knowledge the Answer?” *JETS* 36 (1993) 55-64.

<sup>25</sup> For examples of this kind of language from those who defend present knowledge see Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge” 143–62; Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* 186–205; J. R. Lucas, “Foreknowledge and the Vulnerability of God,” in *The Philosophy in Christianity* (ed. Godfrey Vesey; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989) 119-28.

<sup>26</sup> Basinger, “Divine Control and Human Freedom” 58.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

God's future thus resembles ours in that it is both definite and indefinite.<sup>27</sup> But it differs greatly from ours in the extent to which it is definite. Since we are largely ignorant of the past and present, the future appears vastly indefinite to us. We know very little of what will happen because we know and understand so little of what has already happened. God, in contrast, knows all that has happened. Therefore a great deal of the future that appears vague and indefinite to us must be vividly clear to Him.<sup>28</sup>

But, it must be quickly added, even after all the caveats have been factored in, open theists must affirm that a God with only present knowledge must take risks. For if God makes decisions that depend for their outcomes on the responses of free creatures in which the decisions themselves are not informed by knowledge of the outcomes, then creating and governing such a world is, in the words of William Hasker, "a risky business."<sup>29</sup>

## II. The Openness Proposal And The Doctrine Of Scripture

We now turn to investigate whether the open theist construal of the divine sovereignty-omniscience and human freedom relationship has any logical bearing on the doctrine of Scripture. Is the openness proposal able to uphold a high view of Scripture or will it undermine it? Given the openness proposal of God's relation to the world, does it have any bearing on what we may or may not affirm about Scripture? It is to these questions that we now turn, and I will attempt to address these questions in two steps. First, I want to think through the open theist's view of the divine sovereignty-freedom relationship as it relates to the doctrine of inspiration. Second, I want to investigate the openness proposal regarding divine omniscience in relation to the subject of predictive prophecy.

### 1. Divine sovereignty, human freedom, and the concursive theory of inspiration.

Does the openness proposal regarding the sovereignty-freedom relationship make any difference in what we may affirm about Scripture? An excellent place to begin our evaluation is with a short but very insightful article by David Basinger and Randall

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<sup>27</sup> See Boyd, *God of the Possible* 21–87, who also makes this same point.

<sup>28</sup> Rice, *God's Foreknowledge and Man's Free Will* 55–56. Peter Geach in a very similar way argues that just because the future is indeterminate does not mean that God's ultimate plans will not come to pass. In his book (*Providence and Evil* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977] 40–66), Geach views God as a "Grand Chess Master" who is simultaneously playing several games of chess. He has everything under control, even though some of the players are consciously trying to hinder his plan, while others are trying to help it. But whatever the finite players do, God's plan will be executed because as the Grand Master he cannot be surprised, thwarted, cheated, or disappointed.

<sup>29</sup> Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* 197.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Basinger entitled “Inerrancy, Dictation, and the Free Will Defence.”<sup>30</sup> What is significant about this article, at least for our purposes, is the Basingers’ argument—“one cannot consistently affirm the total inerrancy of Scripture and yet *also* utilize the Free Will Defense as a response to the problem of evil.”<sup>31</sup> Now at first sight this argument might seem somewhat removed from our investigation regarding whether the open theist construal of divine sovereignty makes any difference in what one may affirm about Scripture, but it is really not. In fact, if we carefully unpack the Basingers’ argument, we will soon discover that it has a direct bearing on our investigation.

The Basingers begin their article by observing that “one of the stock arguments employed by the challenger to the inerrancy position is that inerrancy implies a dictation theory of inspiration.”<sup>32</sup> That is, in order to obtain a verbally inspired and inerrant Scripture, one must affirm, so says the critic, that the human authors were reduced to impersonal instruments, and as such, in the writing of Scripture their freedom was taken away.

In response to the critics, the Basingers rightly acknowledge that modern proponents of inerrancy emphatically deny that dictation is necessary in order to accept the inerrancy position.<sup>33</sup> In reply, proponents of inerrancy insist that the reason one can affirm verbal inspiration and inerrancy is precisely because the Scriptural writers’ “thinking and writings were *both* free and spontaneous on their part *and* divinely elicited and controlled.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, it is for this very reason that proponents of a traditional view of Scripture have argued for a *concurrent* theory of inspiration, in contrast to a dictation theory. The rationale for this is to emphasize that both God and the human author are

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<sup>30</sup> David Basinger and Randall Basinger, “Inerrancy, Dictation, and the Free Will Defense,” *EvQ* 55 (1983) 177-80. See also the exchange of articles that the Basingers’ article has generated between themselves and Norman Geisler. See Norman Geisler, “Inerrancy and Free Will: A Reply to the Brothers Basinger,” *EvQ* 57 (1985) 349-53; Basinger and Basinger, “Inerrancy and Free Will: Some Further Thoughts,” *EvQ* 58 (1986) 351-54; Geisler, “Is Inerrancy Incompatible with the Free Will Defence?” *EvQ* 62 (1990) 175-78.

<sup>31</sup> Basinger and Basinger, “Inerrancy and Free Will: Some Further Thoughts” 351.

<sup>32</sup> Basinger and Basinger, “Inerrancy, Dictation, and The Free Will Defence” 177. For two contemporary examples of the charge of dictation see William Abraham, *The Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 28-38, and James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1981) 290-93.

<sup>33</sup> For denials that the traditional view of Scripture implies a dictation theory of inspiration see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority* (Waco: Word, 1976-83) 4.138; J. I. Packer, ‘Fundamentalism’ and the Word of God (London: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1958) 78-79; B. B. Warfield, “Inspiration,” in *Selected Shorter Writings* (ed. John E. Meeter; Nutley: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973) 2.614-36. For a discussion as to why the dictation theory of inspiration is contrary to the biblical evidence and thus why it should be rejected see I. H. Marshall, *Biblical Inspiration* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 32-33.

<sup>34</sup> Packer, ‘Fundamentalism’ and the Word of God 80. Also see John Davis, *Foundations of Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 174-76; Gordon R. Lewis, “The Human Authorship of Inspired Scripture,” in *Inerrancy* (ed. Norman Geisler; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980) 227-64; A. N. S. Lane, “B. B. Warfield on the Humanity of Scripture,” *Vox Evangelica* 16 (1986) 77-94.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

active in the process, thus guaranteeing that what God intended through the human authors was written.

Now at this point, the Basingers insist, in order for the proponents of inerrancy to succeed in their reply to the critics, they must accept as true the following proposition: "Human activities (such as penning a book) can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom."<sup>35</sup> If this proposition is accepted, maintain the Basingers, then the argument for a high view of Scripture must look something like this:

1. The words of the Bible are the product of free human activity (are human utterances).
2. Human activities (such as penning a book) can be totally controlled by God without violating human freedom.
3. God totally controlled what human authors did in fact write.
4. Therefore, the words of the Bible are God's utterances.
5. Whatever God utters is errorless (inerrant).
6. Therefore, the words of the Bible are errorless (inerrant).<sup>36</sup>

But, contend the Basingers, there is a major problem with this argument. The problem is not so much with the argument itself, but with its implications. For example, if one accepts premise (2), then major implications follow for one who attempts to answer the problem of evil along the lines of the famous Free Will Defense (FWD). In fact, the Basingers argue that the acceptance of (2) is incompatible with the FWD. Why is this the case? Because, as the Basingers correctly point out, in order for the FWD to be successful, it must assume a specific conception of human freedom, namely libertarianism.<sup>37</sup> The Basingers state it this way:

The assumption behind this argument [FWD] is the belief that God *cannot* both create free moral creatures and still bring it about (infallibly guarantee) that they will perform the specific actions he desires. For once it is assumed that God *can* control the actions of free creatures, it follows immediately that God could have created a world containing free moral agents but absolutely no moral evil—i.e. God could have brought it about that every individual would always freely choose

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<sup>35</sup> Basinger and Basinger, "Inerrancy, Dictation, and The Free Will Defence" 178.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 179. In the contemporary literature, no one has done more to develop and defend the FWD than Alvin Plantinga in *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

in every situation to perform the exact action God desired. But if God could have brought it about that every instance of moral evil was freely not performed, then we must conclude that God is directly responsible for each instance of moral evil in the world and the free will defence fails. In short, the free will defence can only work—i.e. divine responsibility for the actuality of moral evil in the world can only be absolved—by denying that God can totally control free creatures, that is, by denying premise (2).<sup>38</sup>

Given the fact that the FWD is linked to an acceptance of libertarianism (and its particular construal of divine sovereignty), it should now be quite evident why an adoption of the FWD is incompatible with (2). Premise (2) assumes that God can infallibly *guarantee* that human beings will perform the specific actions he desires without violating their freedom, whereas libertarianism denies this possibility. Thus, the Basingers conclude their article with the following dilemma: either affirm (2) and thus inerrancy, but at the cost of making God responsible for all the moral evil in the world; or adopt the use of the FWD, thus absolving God of any responsibility for evil, but at the cost of rejecting (2) and thus being “left with the seemingly impossible task of showing how God could perfectly control what the biblical writers uttered without removing their freedom.”<sup>39</sup>

How are we to evaluate the Basingers’ argument? Two points need to be emphasized. First, the Basingers’ argument is reductionistic. Why? It is so because there are more options available to us than what they seem to allow. For example, the FWD is *not* the only way to absolve God of the responsibility for evil in the world. No doubt, for a person who embraces a libertarian view of human freedom, the FWD is a logically consistent and an attractive option. Nonetheless, it is not the only defense available to a libertarian, nor is it the only defense that is available to other theological viewpoints that do not embrace libertarianism.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, along a similar line and more importantly for our purposes, the Basingers are reductionistic in presenting libertarianism as the only option for a defender of inerrancy. Even though it is outside the purpose of this paper, I would argue that a person such as myself, who adopts a view of divine sovereignty that

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. On this same point cf. Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1974) 166-67.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 180.

<sup>40</sup> On other ways to solve the problem of evil from a commitment to libertarian freedom see John S. Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 111-23. However, regardless of which way a libertarian attempts to solve the problem of evil, it is still true that if one adopts libertarianism, there is a problem with holding premise (2). On other ways to solve the problem of evil from a non-libertarian view, see Feinberg’s defense of a compatibilistic theological position in *The Many Faces of Evil* 124-55. On this latter point also see John M. Frame, *Apologetics to the Glory of God* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1994) 149-90; Greg L. Bahn-sen, *Always Ready* (Texarkana: Covenant Media Foundation, 1996) 163-75.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

incorporates a compatibilistic understanding of human freedom, is able to affirm premise (2) without contradiction and thus defend a high view of Scripture.

Second, I do think that their argument, however, does have important implications for open theism. Why? Because given open theism's understanding of the sovereignty-freedom relationship, it would seem that it must reject premise (2). But with the rejection of premise (2) there is a very serious entailment, namely, that the theological underpinnings for a high view of Scripture have been greatly weakened. Why? Because if God cannot infallibly *guarantee* what the human authors freely wrote was precisely what he wanted written, without error, then it seems difficult to substantiate the traditional view of Scripture at this point.<sup>41</sup> In fact, most defenders of a high view of Scripture have viewed premise (2) as intimately connected with a proper defense of inerrancy. As E. J. Young wrote many years ago, "inspiration is designed to *secure* the accuracy of what is taught and to keep the Lord's spokesman from error in his teaching.... inspiration is designed to *secure* infallibility...."<sup>42</sup> But with the undermining of premise (2), open theism greatly weakens the theological defense for an infallible and inerrant Bible.

But does this then entail that the person who adopts open theism or a libertarian view of freedom cannot *logically* affirm inerrancy? In terms of logical possibility, the answer is no. It is logically possible to affirm that the biblical authors "just happened" to write everything that God wanted them to write, without God *guaranteeing* it.<sup>43</sup> For it is true, as Norman Geisler contends in his response to the Basingers, that "it is not essential (necessary) for humans to err whenever they speak or write ... human free choice only makes error *possible*, not necessary."<sup>44</sup> But even though it is logically possible to affirm libertarianism and inerrancy, it must be acknowledged that it is highly improbable. For without an infallible *guarantee*, given the diversity of the biblical authors and the nature of the content of Scripture, the probability that the biblical authors just happened to get everything correct, thus resulting in an infallible and inerrant text, is indeed very, very low.

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<sup>41</sup> I am assuming in the following discussion that the dictation theory of inspiration is not an option. No doubt, one could always defend inerrancy and libertarianism by affirming that in the special case of Scripture God took away the freedom of the authors and dictated the text. This would certainly be a logical explanation. However, for anyone who takes the phenomena of the Scripture seriously, this is not really a viable option.

<sup>42</sup> E. J. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957) 41-42 (emphasis mine).

<sup>43</sup> The Basingers admit this possibility as a mere possibility, but then correctly argue that if (2) is false then "God can never *guarantee* that any human will freely do what he wants" ("Inerrancy and Free Will: Some Further Thoughts" 354).

<sup>44</sup> Geisler, "Inerrancy and Free Will" 350.

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Moreover, a commitment to open theism and a libertarian view of freedom also raises an important epistemological issue. What happens when we find an apparent error or contradiction in Scripture? What should our attitude be toward the Bible? Should we seek to resolve it because we are convinced that Scripture is inerrant? And if we are so convinced, from where does this conviction come? For if God *cannot* guarantee that what he wanted written was written, then our conviction on these matters certainly does not stem from the view that the Scriptures were “divinely elicited and controlled, and what they [biblical writers] wrote was not only their own work but also God’s work.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, when we do come across an apparent contradiction or problem in Scripture, do we then admit that it is an error? For after all, given libertarianism, it may be true that it is logically possible to affirm inerrancy, but the probability of it is so low that we have no overwhelming reason to think that the apparent problem is not really an error after all. And if we move in this direction, can Scripture then serve as its own self-attesting authority by which we evaluate all theological proposals?<sup>46</sup> Or are we driven always to confirm Scripture at point after point, on independent grounds whatever they may be, and not to receive Scripture on its own say so?

Indeed, these are serious implications for one’s view of Scripture given open theism’s understanding of the sovereignty-freedom relationship. But, someone might object, could not this challenge also be raised against other evangelicals who hold to a view of divine sovereignty that incorporates a libertarian view of human freedom, and not just the viewpoint of open theism? Is it only the open theist who succumbs to this kind of problem? Do not all those who affirm libertarianism also face this same dilemma? And thus, are you not indicting other evangelicals who reject open theism but affirm libertarianism? My answer is both yes and no. Yes, in the sense that it is very difficult for any libertarian position to argue consistently how God can *guarantee* that what he wants written is written freely by human authors. But no, in the important sense that traditional evangelicals who are committed to libertarianism are also committed to exhaustive divine foreknowledge of future free human actions which allows them to maintain simultaneously libertarian freedom and the *guarantee* necessary in order to uphold a high view of Scripture. An excellent example of this approach is that of William Craig.

In a recent article, Craig appeals to the theory of middle knowledge as the means by which he reconciles his commitment to libertarianism and the doctrine of inerrancy.<sup>47</sup> Even though I do not adopt this approach and instead opt for a compatibilist solution,

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<sup>45</sup> Packer, ‘Fundamentalism’ and the Word of God 80.

<sup>46</sup> On the issue of the self-attestation of Scripture see John M. Frame, “Scripture Speaks For Itself,” in *God’s Inerrant Word* (ed. John W. Montgomery; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1974) 178-200.

<sup>47</sup> William L. Craig, “Men Moved By the Holy Spirit Spoke From God’ (2 Peter 1:21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration,” *PhC Series 2*, 1/1 (1999) 45-82.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Craig does demonstrate cogently that there is a way to reconcile libertarianism and inerrancy.<sup>48</sup> But it is important to stress that this is *not* an option “open” to open theists. And thus, the openness proposal faces some serious problems, especially in regard to how God can *guarantee* what he intends to be written, through the free agency of human authors. How, in the end, is open theism able to explain rationally and coherently how both God and the human author are active in the process of inspiration and that the final result is exactly what God intended? It would seem that the openness proposal, at least at this point, undermines the doctrine of inerrancy and has a difficult time accounting for the confluent authorship of Scripture.<sup>49</sup>

Interestingly, Clark Pinnock, in response to an article of mine on this subject, basically admits this point but then appeals to the “interplay of divine initiative and human activity.”<sup>50</sup> He goes on to explain that God is overseeing the process, but human authors are also active in the process as well. He states, “God is always present, not always in the

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<sup>48</sup> The problem I have with middle knowledge is that I do not think it can get off the ground in terms of an explanation. Middle knowledge depends upon the notion that God knows what we *would* freely do, not just could do, and were we placed in different circumstances, and on the basis of that knowledge, God then freely decides to actualize one of those worlds known to him through this middle knowledge. But given *libertarianism*, I do not see how God can *know*, even counterfactually, what we *would* do if we can always choose otherwise. Hence, in the end, I do not think middle knowledge will be able to deliver what it promises. For similar critiques of middle knowledge at this point see Helm, *The Providence of God* 55–61; J. A. Crabtree, “Does Middle Knowledge Solve the Problem of Divine Sovereignty?” in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will* (ed. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 2.429–57; Feinberg, *The Many Faces of Evil* 89–90.

<sup>49</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to compare the early Clark Pinnock with the current Pinnock. The early Pinnock, by his own admission, was a strong advocate of both inerrancy and a Calvinistic view of divine sovereignty. The current Pinnock, now an advocate of open theism with its weakened view of divine sovereignty, has also shifted to a weakened view of inerrancy. The early Pinnock maintained that the concept of confluent authorship is only intelligible within the context of biblical theism. By this he meant, “God and man can both be significant agents simultaneously in the same historical (Acts 2:23) or literary (2 Pet 1:21) event. The Spirit of God worked concursively alongside the activity of the writers, Himself being the principal cause and they the free instrumental cause. The result of this concursive operation was that their thinking and writing were both free and spontaneous on their part and divinely elicited and controlled, and what they wrote was not only their own work, but also God’s work. There is a monotonous chorus of protest against the biblical concept of inspiration on the grounds that it involves mechanical dictation. The only way to explain the repetition of this false charge is to recognize the sad eclipse of biblical theism today. Men seem unable to conceive of a divine providence which can infallibly reach its ends without dehumanizing the human agents it employs. According to the Bible, the sovereignty of God does not nullify the significance of man” (*Biblical Revelation* [Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1985 (1971)] 92–93). However, the current Pinnock views the traditional emphasis on *concursum* as suggesting total divine control, tantamount to saying God dictated the text (see *The Scripture Principle* [New York: Harper & Row, 1984] 100–101).

<sup>50</sup> Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 129. For my article see S. J. Wellum, “The Importance of the Nature of Divine Sovereignty for Our View of Scripture,” *SBJT* 4/2 (2000) 76–90.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

mode of control, but often in the manner of stimulation and invitation. God works alongside human beings in order to achieve by wisdom and patience the goal of a Bible that expresses his will for our salvation.”<sup>51</sup> True enough, but given the openness proposal regarding the sovereignty-freedom relationship, how is this explanation a rational accounting for the *guarantee* that seems to underpin the doctrine of inerrancy?<sup>52</sup> It seems to me that open theism must resort to some kind of “paradox” explanation at this point, unless they want to appeal to a dictation theory of inspiration, something which I have never seen them do. However, the problem with “paradox” explanations is that, at the end of the day, they force us to believe in logically contradictory states of affairs and leave us with no satisfying rational explanation regarding the sovereignty-freedom and Scripture relationship, thus undermining our confidence in the doctrine of inerrancy.<sup>53</sup>

## 2. Divine omniscience, human freedom, and predictive prophecy.

We now turn our attention to the implications of the openness proposal regarding divine omniscience and the phenomena of predictive prophecy. At the outset it would seem that an adoption of the openness proposal at this point would have some serious entailments for an evangelical view of Scripture. Why? Because it seems highly improbable for a God who does not have exhaustive knowledge of future contingents to be able to predict accurately what will come to pass. If Scripture contains predictions and prophecies about the future, which most evangelicals admit, then how is God able to *guarantee* that these predictions will come to pass as he has predicted?<sup>54</sup> God might be able to give us a

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> On this point see the more accurate analysis of Edward Farley and Peter Hodgson, “Scripture and Tradition,” in *Christian Theology* (2d ed.; ed. Peter C. Hodgson and Robert H. King; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 61-87.

<sup>53</sup> No doubt, it must be admitted that all of us, no matter what our theological convictions are, have to appeal to “mystery” in speaking of the sovereignty-freedom relationship and its application to the doctrine of Scripture. However, my point is that the open theist proposal is not merely appealing to “mystery”; it is also attempting to reconcile a view of sovereignty-freedom that is fundamentally at odds with the doctrine of inerrancy and a concursive theory of inspiration, at least in terms of rational accounting for and theological explanation of it.

<sup>54</sup> William Craig nicely affirms what most evangelicals admit about Scripture, namely that it contains various predictions and prophecies about the future. He states, “God’s knowledge of the future seems essential to the prophetic pattern that underlies the biblical scheme of history. The test of the true prophet was success in foretelling the future: ‘When a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does not come to pass or come true, that is a word which the Lord has not spoken’ (Deut 18:22). The history of Israel was punctuated with prophets who foretold events in both the immediate and distant future, and it was the conviction of the New Testament writers that the coming and work of Jesus had been prophesied” (see *The Only Wise God* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987] 27). Craig goes on to give numerous other examples of the kinds of predictions that are found in Scripture (see *ibid.* 27-30).



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Scripture that includes his guesses, expert conjectures, or even adept hypotheses of how he expects his plan for the world to unfold. But this is certainly a far cry from God being able to give us *infallible* and *inerrant* knowledge of these matters.<sup>55</sup> For it would seem that if God's knowledge of future contingents is not exhaustive, then he is only able, at best, to make intelligent conjectures about what free persons might do. But does this not imply that God, in fact, is ignorant of vast stretches of forthcoming history since, as William Craig rightly contends, "even a single significant human choice could turn history in a different direction, and subsequent events would, as time goes on, be increasingly different from his expectations. At best, God can be said to have a good idea of what will happen only in the very near future."<sup>56</sup> And if God is ignorant of vast stretches of forthcoming history, then how can any of the predictive prophecies in Scripture be anything less than mere probabilities?<sup>57</sup>

In addition, given the fact that prophecies have taken place, then, given the claims of Scripture, they must necessarily come to pass and thus be true. But, once again, if one denies that God is able to know future contingents, then how does one explain how God can *know* that these prophecies will truly come to pass? Would it not be more consistent to affirm that God possibly has or might err on these matters? But if one were to admit that, then how would one also affirm that Scripture is an infallible and inerrant revelation on all areas that it touches, including the prophetic realm? It seems that the openness proposal faces a serious dilemma. Either reject the inerrancy of Scripture and admit that God can only give us probabilities about the future, or reject the openness proposal regarding divine omniscience for the traditional view of God's exhaustive knowledge of the future and retain the doctrine of inerrancy. At least on the surface, there seems to be no other option.

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<sup>55</sup> By the term "knowledge" I am referring to what epistemologists have defined as "justified true belief." See John L. Pollock, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1986) 7-10.

<sup>56</sup> Craig, *The Only Wise God* 39. See also Morris, *Our Idea of God* 101 and Basinger, "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought" 409.

<sup>57</sup> Francis J. Beckwith, in a very helpful article ("Limited Omniscience and the Test For a Prophet: A Brief Philosophical Analysis," *JETS* 36 [1993] 357-62) defends the same conclusion. Working from a commitment to inerrancy, Beckwith asserts that one of the tests for a true prophet is given in Deut 18:22: "If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him" (NIV). From this criterion, Beckwith forms the following argument (A): (1) If X speaks for God about the future in any possible world, then necessarily in any possible world X is correct about the future when he speaks for God about the future. (2) It is not the case that X is correct about prophecy Y. (3) Therefore X does not speak for God (p. 358).

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

Of course, many non-evangelical theologians do not have a problem with this conclusion.<sup>58</sup> But for many open theists who want to maintain both the doctrine of inerrancy and their view of divine omniscience, this poses a serious dilemma. Indeed, William Hasker admits quite candidly that one of the major obstacles to the acceptance of their view is that of predictive prophecy. As Hasker asks, “if God does not *know* what the future will be like, how can he *tell* us what it will be like?”<sup>59</sup> How, then, do open theists respond? Generally, there are three responses that all center on their understanding of biblical prophecy—an understanding of which does not entail divine foreknowledge of future contingents. Let us look at each in turn to discover whether the attempt to reconcile a high view of Scripture with the openness proposal is successful or not.

First, there is a kind of conditional prophecy which does not require a detailed foreknowledge of what will actually happen since the purpose of it is to call God’s people back to covenant faithfulness and repentance.<sup>60</sup> In fact, conditional prophecy assumes that “what is foretold may *not* happen.”<sup>61</sup> Second, many prophecies are “predictions based on foresight drawn from existing trends and tendencies” which do not require God to have foreknowledge of future contingents in order to give us predictions.<sup>62</sup> As Hasker reminds us, “even with our grossly inadequate knowledge of such trends and tendencies, we invest enormous amounts of energy trying to make forecasts in this way; evidently God with his perfect knowledge could do it much better.”<sup>63</sup> An example of such a prophecy is God’s prediction to Moses about the hardness of Pharaoh’s heart. Richard Rice suggests that “the ruler’s character may have been so rigid that it was entirely predictable. God understood him well enough to know exactly what his reaction to

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<sup>58</sup> James Barr is a good example. He thinks the prophetic element in Scripture has been greatly exaggerated. In fact, one of his main criticisms against the traditional view of Scripture is that it has treated the Bible as only one kind of literature—prophetic literature, or what he calls the “prophetic paradigm.” As such, Barr believes that the prophetic paradigm stands at the very center of the traditional view’s doctrine of inspiration: the authors speak not their own words but those given them by God. Barr believes that there are two results which follow from the prophetic paradigm: (1) the prophetic paradigm is extended to all of Scripture; (2) the prophetic paradigm conveys implications of the sort of truth that must reside in Scripture—verbal, supernatural, inerrant, and infallible. See his book, *Beyond Fundamentalism* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 20-32. For a similar criticism of the traditional view see John Barton, *People of the Book* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1988) 71. For a response to James Barr’s charge, see Vanhoozer, “God’s Mighty Speech Acts” 154–56.

<sup>59</sup> Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* 194.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* For these same three responses see also Pinnock, “God Limits His Knowledge” 158; *Most Moved Mover* 50–53; Rice, *God’s Foreknowledge and Man’s Free Will* 75–81; Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 129–37.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.* 194.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* 194-95.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

certain situations would be.”<sup>64</sup> Third, many prophecies include things that are foreknown, because it is God’s purpose or intention to bring them about irrespective of human decision. After all, God is God, and if he intends to accomplish a certain task, he does not have to foresee it before he can know about it; he can simply declare it so, and it will be accomplished. Thus, as Richard Rice explains, “if God’s will is the only condition required for something to happen, if human cooperation is not involved, then God can unilaterally guarantee its fulfillment, and he can announce it ahead of time ... God can predict his own actions.”<sup>65</sup> Most of the events of redemptive history—the prediction of the incarnation, the cross, and the second coming—are all placed in this last category by open theists.<sup>66</sup>

Now, of course, the major question in this explanation is whether the above strategy will work, given the parameters of the doctrine of inerrancy. Let us look at each of the steps of this strategy in turn and ask whether it actually delivers what it promises.

First, no one denies that the prophets’ role was primarily to call the covenant people back to obedience. In this regard, many prophecies were and are conditional, but certainly not all of them. For example, what about the prophecies that refer to the specific place of Christ’s birth, the fact that our Lord would be virgin born, or even the fact that our Lord would ultimately be rejected and crucified? What about prophecies regarding the second advent of Christ? Certainly these are not conditional. No doubt, open theists admit that these latter kinds of prophecies, especially those centered in the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, are not conditional. That is why they place such prophecies under category (3). But as I will argue below, I think there are some problems with this as well.

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<sup>64</sup> Rice, “Biblical Support,” in *Openness* 51. Clark Pinnock adds the further point that many of these prophetic forecasts based on present situations are also quite imprecise, so imprecise that many of these prophecies go unfulfilled. Does this then mean that the prophecies were *wrong*? No, Pinnock states. “God is free in the manner of fulfilling prophecy and is not bound to a script, even his own. The world is a project and God works on it creatively; he is free to strike out in new directions. We cannot pin the free God down” (*Most Moved Mover* 51). But what exactly does this mean? It is hard not to think that Pinnock is attempting to find a way to maintain biblical prophecy in such a way that does not require complete accuracy.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> In regard to the cross, open theists argue that God did not foresee it; instead “he declared that it was going to happen, because he fully intended to bring it about” (Hasker, *God, Time, Knowledge* 195). However, open theists do not all agree on the timing of this intention. Greg Boyd, for example, argues that “it was certain that Jesus would be crucified, but it was not certain from eternity that Pilot [*sic*], Herod, or Caiaphas would play the roles they played in the crucifixion” (*God of the Possible* 45). John Sanders, on the other hand, does not even view the cross as planned from the creation of the world. For him, it only comes about as late as Gethsemane, as Jesus wrestles with the will of his Father and comes to the conclusion that he must now go to the cross (see *God Who Risks* 98–104).

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Second, the suggestion that many of the non-conditional prophecies can be explained in terms of predictions based on foresight drawn from existing trends and tendencies does not help us either. Given a libertarian view of free will, how is it that God can make any predictions based on existing trends? There is simply no way God can *guarantee* the fulfillment of any prediction, even if it is only based on existing trends and tendencies, since the agent could always do otherwise. Unless, of course, what you mean by “prediction” is that God makes guesses, conjectures, and expert hypotheses. But this is a far cry from what a high view of Scripture asserts, namely that God has made prophecies and predictions of the future and as such, he *guarantees* that they will come true.

William Hasker, in fact, basically admits this fact. Hasker argues that God’s purpose and superior strategy will *not* enable him to foresee *everything* that will happen, but, he says, “the central point is that God is able to carry out his overall plan despite whatever resistance may be offered by human beings.”<sup>67</sup> But, of course, that view might be acceptable for other views of Scripture that deny inerrancy, but it is not acceptable for a view that does not. A high view of Scripture requires that unless God is able to foresee and know everything that will happen, then he cannot *guarantee* that predictive passages of Scripture will be an *infallible* and *inerrant* revelation of his will.

In this regard it is interesting to note a footnote of Richard Rice in his article “Biblical Support for a New Perspective.” In the article, Rice chides Francis Beckwith for criticizing the view of presentism in light of a single “biblical test of a prophet,” namely, the ability to predict the future accurately. Rice complains that Beckwith equates an “unfulfilled prophecy” with a “false prediction” and then argues that unless a prophet is correct about the future in every possible world the prophet does not speak for God. Rice is disturbed that Beckwith ignores what he calls “the texture and complexity of biblical prophecy.” Moreover, Rice goes on to state that Beckwith fails to consider other kinds of prophecy such as conditional prophecies, and as such, Beckwith only presents a one-sided picture of biblical prophecy.<sup>68</sup>

The problem with Rice’s analysis, however, is that it misses the point. I am sure that Beckwith would agree with Rice that there are different types of prophecies in Scripture and one of those types contains conditional prophecies. But Beckwith’s main intent is not to analyze “the texture and complexity of biblical prophecy,” but to take a legitimate biblical criterion, a criterion, we must emphasize, that is bound up with a high view of Scripture, and to demonstrate that, given the model of presentism, it is impossible to uphold this criterion. For if it is possible for God to make a mistake in predicting the future, a possibility that presentism must allow, then it is not only impossible to uphold

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<sup>67</sup> Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* 196.

<sup>68</sup> See Rice’s criticisms of Beckwith’s article in, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective” 181, n. 76.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

the biblical criterion of a test of a true prophet, but it is also impossible to maintain that God can *guarantee* that his promises and predictions will come to pass. No doubt, one could still argue that it is possible that God “just happened” to predict everything correctly and that the biblical authors just happened to write everything that God wanted them to write. But that appeal is certainly quite different than asserting that God can *guarantee* that what he predicts will come true.

Third, it must be admitted that in some cases God does act unilaterally irrespective of human decision. However, there are a good number of prophecies that are neither conditional, nor mere predictions based on foresight drawn from existing trends, but prophecies that are unconditional, that convey God’s intentions of what will certainly occur through the means of future human choices and actions. And it is precisely in these kinds of prophecies that God most clearly demonstrates himself to be the Lord over history (see Isaiah 40–48). Certainly the major redemptive events of Scripture, such as the death of Christ, involved both the free actions of individuals to crucify Jesus and the sovereign predetermination and foreknowledge of God (see e.g. Acts 2:23; 4:23–30). It will hardly do to reduce these events either to a conditional category or merely to God’s purposes and intentions irrespective of human actions. Yes, God declared that Jesus was going to die, but he also declared the manner of his death and the intricate details concerning all those humans who would freely be a part of his death in the precise fulfillment of OT Scripture. In the case of the cross, it requires much more than God’s general knowledge and strategies of the future. Instead, it requires nothing less than God’s detailed foreknowledge.<sup>69</sup> But how can God predict such an event, given the intertwined views of libertarianism and presentism?<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> D. A. Carson states it this way: “It will not do to analyze what happened as an instance where wicked agents performed an evil deed, and then God intervened to turn it into good, for in that case the cross itself becomes an afterthought in the mind of God, a mere reactive tactic. All of Scripture is against the notion. The Biblical theology of sacrifice, the passover lamb, the specifications for *yom kippur*, the priestly/sacrificial system—all together anticipate and predict, according to the NT authors, the ultimate sacrifice, the sacrifice of the ultimate lamb of God. But neither will it do to reduce the guilt of the conspirators because God remained in charge. If there is no guilt attaching to those who were immediately responsible for sending Jesus to the cross, why should one think that there is guilt attaching to *any* action performed under the sovereignty of God? And in that case, of course, we do not need any atonement for guilt: The cross is superfluous and useless” (“God, the Bible, and Spiritual Warfare: A Review Article” *JETS* 42 [1999] 263).

<sup>70</sup> William Craig has some helpful comments on this point. He states, “Explanation (1) [the idea that prophecy can be explained in terms of God’s announcement of what he intends to do] is useful only in accounting for God’s knowledge of events which he himself will bring about. But the Scripture provides many examples of divine foreknowledge of events which God does not directly cause, events which are the result of free human actions. And even in prophecies concerning God’s own actions, foreknowledge of free human actions is sometimes presupposed. For example, when God speaks of using Cyrus to

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

What, then, should we conclude about the relationship between the openness proposal regarding divine omniscience and the doctrine of Scripture? Does the proposal uphold or undermine a high view of Scripture or does it have very little impact? It would seem that the openness proposal does have some very significant implications for one's doctrine of Scripture. Two points need to be made in this regard. First, even though it is *logically* possible for someone to affirm simultaneously an openness view of divine foreknowledge and the doctrine of inerrancy by believing that God, as well as the biblical authors, "just happened" to get everything right, it is certainly highly improbable. In fact, I see no explanation forthcoming as to how open theists are able to affirm that God can *guarantee* that what he predicts will in fact come true.

Second, even if one desired to affirm the doctrine of inerrancy and open theism at this point of predictive prophecy, how would one attempt to do so? Inductively, one could not now make the affirmation that Scripture is inerrant since there would be no way to *know* until the eschaton whether God and the biblical authors just happened to get it right. Deductively, one could not now make the affirmation either since not one of us could say with assurance that God is able to *guarantee* that all of his promises and predictions will come to pass given the openness view of divine foreknowledge. Thus, even though it is logically possible to affirm open theism and inerrancy in regard to predictive prophecy, similar to its implications with the doctrine of inspiration, it is highly improbable that such a view will yield an inerrant set of passages that predict future events.

## III. Concluding Reflections

What, then, shall we conclude about our investigation as to the relationship between the openness proposal on divine sovereignty-omniscience and the doctrine of Scripture? I offer three brief concluding reflections.

First, open theism must seriously reconsider their proposal on the relationship between divine sovereignty-omniscience and human freedom, because it leads to insurmountable problems for a high view of Scripture. No doubt, the openness proposal does allow for open theists logically to affirm inerrancy even though it would be highly improbable. But more importantly, the openness proposal undermines: (1) any kind of *guarantee* that either the human authors will freely write precisely what God wanted written, or that

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subdue the nations (Isa 44:28–45:1), God's intention presupposes his foreknowledge that such a person shall in fact come to exist at the proper time and place and be in a position to serve as God's instrument. To respond that God brings about all these details as well would be to deny the very human freedom which the view we are discussing wants to affirm" (*The Only Wise God* 43–44). On some similar points see the helpful discussions in Frame, *No Other God* 198–203; Feinberg, *No One Like Him* 767–75.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

what God predicts will in fact come to pass; and (2) a strong epistemological grounding to our belief in and defense of the inerrancy of Scripture.

Second, if open theism wants to maintain and defend a high view of Scripture along with the theological underpinnings of that view, they need to surrender their open view of God.<sup>71</sup> I do not see how any coherent and rational defense of an inerrant Scripture can be made on the foundation of open theism.

Third, open theists should not be surprised that other evangelicals find their views unacceptable and outside the limits of evangelical theology. Evangelicals are willing to think through theological matters time and time again in light of Scripture. But when proposals arise that have implications that undermine the very basis for an authoritative and inerrant Bible, it should come as no surprise that many evangelicals will find these proposals problematic, unwarranted, and unbiblical.<sup>†</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> On this point see the wise observation of J. I. Packer when he writes, “The customary apologetic for biblical authority operates on too narrow a front. As we have seen, faith in the God of the Reformation theology is the necessary presupposition of faith in Scripture as “God’s Word written,” and without this faith *sola Scriptura* as the God-taught principle of authority more or less loses its meaning ... we must never lose sight of the fact that our doctrine of God is decisive for our concept of Scripture, and that in our controversy with a great deal of modern theology it is here, rather than in relation to the phenomena of Scripture, that the decisive battle must be joined” (“Sola Scriptura’ in History and Today,” in *God’s Inerrant Word* 60).

<sup>†</sup> Wellum, S. J. (2002). “Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience, Inerrancy, and Open Theism: An Evaluation.” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 45(2), 256–277.