

God's Foreknowledge and Human Suffering

The second part of my book *Human Suffering and the Evil of Religion* deals with a favorite subject in anti-Christian literature, the claim that religion, and Christianity in particular, causes much harm and suffering in the world and little or no good. It also looks at some of the more serious ethical difficulties with atheism. In a previous short discussion of the book (<http://www.encounter1.org/12-1/>) I have

included a short quotation which strongly points out one of the most serious problems with atheism.

The first part of the book looks at some common answers to the problem of human suffering which Christians and other theists would offer, as well as some answers which are not that common. Much of this approach to the problem of evil is also covered in this website in my debate with Paul Doland on the problem of evil (<http://www.encounter1.org/9-1/>).

Looking at the first two chapters in the biblical book of Job we see that God allows Job great

pain in order to test him to see if he will remain faithful to the God he has trusted and known or if he will reject this God. But Job also becomes good in a way he never could without that testing as he chooses to be faithful to God. We also see that God fully recompenses those who endure undeserved suffering such that it outweighs any suffering they had endured. This is called the Recipient Oriented Free Will Theodicy. (A theodicy is an answer as to why God allows evil; this is a justification of God's action.)

A second testing oriented theodicy is called the Observer Oriented Free Will Theodicy. Here God

is looking to see how we will respond to others who are suffering: will we seek to have God's heart, God's compassion for them? Will we act in any way we can to alleviate their suffering?

The notion of God needing to know what Job or an outside observer of suffering will choose runs counter to some common Christian and Jewish thinking. Some will claim that God either already knows what Job will choose or has completely determined what he will choose. We need to determine whether such popular and traditional ideas can be maintained as being more biblically and philosophically likely than the view that God

does not foreknow or determine our free choices. This subject is covered more briefly in the book but it is also important that we look at the various arguments for these different theological views in more detail. We will do so in the following.

Calvinism, Molinism, Simple Foreknowledge, and Open Theism

One of the main points of the testing oriented answers to the problem of suffering is that God desires to know what our choices will be in the face of suffering. How much does God know of

our decisions before or without our needing to make such decisions? How much God knows and determines will affect the credibility of the testing theodicies. Many Christians do not like the idea of God needing to depend upon a person making a decision to know what that decision will be. Many of the Augustinian and Calvinistic schools, for example, do not even like the idea of God not determining what our morally significant choices will be. Our decisions to accept or reject God and God's offer of salvation will determine whether we will find final or at least complete acceptance by God. Only God, they believe, should determine what decisions we make and who finds salvation.

(See Beilby and Eddy, *Divine Foreknowledge*, for helpful analyses and critiques of the four view of foreknowledge mentioned above.)

Before going too much farther we should be clear about some of the terms we will use.

Libertarian free will is the ability to make a decision between at least two alternatives with that decision being outside of the control of anything and anyone other than the agent making the decision and not being determined by the nature of that agent. I believe the best theistic views which hold to libertarian freedom would say that God could have chosen that humans not possess this power but by allowing them to have this power, God decreed a self-imposed limitation.

Though God is able to control our every decision, God withheld his power to do so. God leaves open to us this power of choice, this ability to determine our own decisions. (For now we are only concerned about whether humans have this power, not whether there are other created beings who also have this ability.) Though there is much variation in the tenets of different schools of Augustinian and Calvinist theology, for the sake of convenience I will hereafter use the term *Calvinism* to designate the belief of anyone who thinks humans do not possess libertarian free will and that God does control or determine all human decisions.

Molinists believe we possess libertarian free will but they also think God knows what we would freely choose even if we never actually make such choices. This is called middle knowledge, the knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.

I think the account of Job's testing (Job 1:8–12; 2:3–6) suggests that neither Molinism nor Calvinism is true. Let's first look at Molinism. Given Molinism, instead of giving in to Satan's request to have Job tested, God might have said to Satan, "Job does not need to be tested

because I know he will pass the test. Look.” Then a cloud or mist might appear and one sees an image of Job enduring his trial and finally coming through it all with flying colors. Wouldn’t Satan object? Wouldn’t he say, “But he never really endured any testing!”? God could reply, “But this is what *would have happened* had he endured the test. Since I know what he would do without him having to do it, he doesn’t need to endure the test.” Wouldn’t something like this have been the more likely scenario if Molinism were true?

Now some Molinists might say that what is important about this discussion early in the book

of Job is that God wanted Job to endure the testing so that he might thereby become the kind of righteous man he could never become without enduring the test; he became good in a way he could not become otherwise. God knew he would not fail whether he endured the test or not, but it's the actual endurance of the test that made Job different.

Whether or not this claim is true, it is difficult to imagine that the book of Job would not have given us a very different story if it were compatible with Molinism. Wouldn't God have at least told Satan that he knows what Job will do but that it is

important for both God and Job that he endure this test? However this passage might be reinterpreted to fit the Molinist view, the more obvious interpretation would suggest that Molinism is not true and that God can know the outcome of Job's choice in the face of suffering *only if* Job undergoes that suffering and *only once* that suffering is complete.

Under Calvinism, God wouldn't have needed to have Job tested as to his fidelity to God since God would completely determine whether Job or anyone else will pass the test or not. God could have told Satan, "No, Job does not need to be

tested, I've already determined that he would pass the test.”

A Calvinist might respond that even though God has determined how Job will react should he be tested, the testing must occur to perfect him, to make him into the purged and refined gold only suffering can produce. Here again Job 1 and 2 would need to be reinterpreted. This time it is made to mean not that God is actually being challenged concerning the choice Job would make, but rather God is simply determining that Job should undergo suffering to make him better. This new meaning is so far from the most obvious

meaning of the text that it appears to be pure eisegesis, a reading into the text the meaning one wants to see.

Another problem with the Calvinist account is that it is difficult to understand why one must undergo suffering to gain spiritual growth.

Whatever degree of maturity or refining one may attain through suffering given Calvinism, shouldn't we think that God could just give one that maturity or refining without suffering? God's sovereign omnipotence should be able to override this need.

Here the Calvinist will often respond by resorting to a their own unique form of skeptical theism: “We don’t understand why this suffering is needed to produce this unique spiritual maturity but since the Scripture says we need it, we have to accept this as so.” So normally the Calvinist would say that God has the power to make us as good or as great as we can possibly be by God’s choice alone and yet here, for some inscrutable reason, suffering is needed to make us better.

The problem with this approach is that we already have a good reason for God allowing Job’s suffering from the most obvious reading of

the passage. Given Calvinism, we have no apparent reason for this suffering except that God (supposedly) says we need it. We have no way of understanding why we need it. But the most obvious understanding of the text is that Job needs to be tested so that God will know what his choice will be. God needs to know if Job will pass the test. And Job also becomes something he could not be without that choice since God will honor him or be disappointed in him according to his choice. Because a free choice cannot be determined by God, only a free choice in the context of suffering can make one good in a way God alone cannot make one good. Job's testing

makes sense given libertarian free will but it makes no sense given Calvinism.

Other passages also suggest that neither Calvinism nor Molinism is true. We have looked at Deuteronomy 13:3, “The Lord your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all of your soul.” If God has already determined or already knows how we would choose, how can God need or want to find out? The sense of the passage is that God’s knowledge is definitely dependent upon the testing occurring. The account of Abraham’s testing is also similar to that of Job. When he

passes his test God even says, “*Now I know that you fear God*” (Gen 22:12, italics added). “Now I know” is a formulaic expression used several times in the Hebrew Scripture (Exod 18:11; Judg 17:13; 1 Kings 17:24; Zech 9:8). (Kronholm, *Theological*

Dictionary of the Old Testament, 11:445.) In almost all of these passages the most obvious meaning of the terms carry a temporal (*at this time*) as well as an explanatory (*because of this*) sense. Given especially the context of Abraham’s testing, it likely carries a sense—so often found in the Scripture—of “now I experience” or “now I know by experience.” This is to say, God knows because of the experience, not because of a kind

of foreknowledge which does not require the experience to occur. But it also likely indicates that God does not know this until the event occurs.

We are left with two leading views concerning foreknowledge: simple foreknowledge and open theism. *Open theism* will say that God cannot foreknow decisions resulting from future free choices. (Hereafter I will usually say simply open theism does not have “knowledge of future free choices” for such foreknowledge.) God knows the outcome of such choices only as they occur. God does foreknow other future events insofar as they

result from simple mechanistic causation.

Knowledge of all future events or states including the outcome of free choices is called *simple foreknowledge*. It does not include, as in the Molinist view, knowledge of future free choices which God does not allow to occur, what one *would do* whether one does it or not.

We have judged Calvinism and Molinism to be unlikely under several important Scriptural passages. The most obvious reading of all of these passages follows the open theist view. God does not know what people will choose until the time comes for them to make a decision. We

should now ask how simple foreknowledge might explain these passages. In Job 1 and 2 God allowed Job to be tested with suffering to see whether he would remain faithful to God.

Deuteronomy 13 tells us God tests the people to see whether they will love God with all of their hearts. In Genesis 22 God allowed Abraham to be tested and, when he passed the test, God told him that he now knows Abraham fears and honors God. We are told that God tested Hezekiah to see what was in his heart (2 Chron 32:31) and that the Israelites were tested for 40 years in the wilderness (Deut 8:2, 16).

Under simple foreknowledge, the account of God allowing Satan to test Job should be reread not as suggesting that God did not know the outcome of Job's choices but rather that though God knew it, God could not have this knowledge unless the choice occurred. The Recipient Oriented Free Will Theodicy can be seen in this event given simple foreknowledge, as well as the other passages we have brought up, though the more obvious meaning of these passages must be sacrificed. God isn't actually waiting to see what Job or Abraham or Hezekiah or the tested Israelite will do; God knows but God does so by seeing the future events occur. Also, God uses

these tests to allow these people to become good in a way they never could by any other means. As with open theism, God needs to know what we will choose and we need to become good by making that choice.

Though it is possible to read all of the passages we have looked at with a simple foreknowledge understanding, the open theist understanding is more natural and obvious. Only in Genesis 22 when God honors Abraham and tells him “now I know that you fear God” does the simple foreknowledge view appear even more strained and unlikely. Thus far the biblical evidence leads

us to hold open theism over simple foreknowledge. Molinism is even less feasible and, given the passages we have looked at, Calvinism is least likely of all.

Open theists sometimes argue that the reason God is unable to foreknow such freely chosen events is that the event has not occurred yet and therefore there is nothing to be known. This argument presupposes what we may call a tensed view of time (also called the A-theory of time or dynamic time or presentism). It says that only the present is real, the past is gone and the future is not now existent. Because they do not now exist,

they are not real. Christianity says God is *omniscient* (all knowing) but, given open theism, omniscience does not include the knowledge of a freely chosen event which does not exist. Only if God determines the outcome of the choice, which thus could not be a free choice, could God foreknow it. In that case God would control the course of all events or know all determined events and there would be no truly free choices. Open theism requires a redefinition of omniscience from the traditional meaning. The traditional meaning is to know the truth value of every proposition. The new definition would be knowledge of the truth value of every proposition which is logically

possible to know. It would also claim that future free choices (or future contingents) are not logically possible to know. Concerning Molinism it would claim that what a creature *would* freely choose whether one ever chooses it or not is also logically impossible to know.

One does not need to prove that it is impossible to know future free choices. One only needs two things. One must notice, first, that a tensed view of time is more intuitively true than not. To believe that the future is somehow still around and accessible (at least to God) involves a metaphysic, a view of the universe, which is very

far from what the universe seems to be. It's a much more complicated universe which we should reject unless we find good reason to believe it. The Scripture certainly does not assume such a view of time. This view is called a tenseless or B-theory of time.

Modern physics does much more often advocate a tenseless or *block* view of time. Time is often treated as merely another spacial dimension and, indeed, space and time together are routinely called "space-time." Many physicists claim that the tenseless view could be replaced by a tensed view of time but say that it does not at all

as easily fit the known physics of the universe. Some suggest that the tenseless view simply fits better because of the nature of the mathematics and physics we happen to have and use to understand the universe. That is, our physics as we understand it may not provide a sufficiently complete description of the nature of the universe in this regard. Others claim that a tensed view of time can be made to fit our cosmology without much difficulty. Theoretical physicist Steven Weinberg, for one, has complained that “the geometrical point of view has driven a wedge between general relativity and the theory of elementary particles.” (Weinberg, *Gravitation and Cosmology*, vii.) The

geometric view is a tenseless view of the universe. Since relativity has assumed tenseless time and quantum mechanics assumes a tensed view of time, he appears to be suggesting that we need to adapt a tensed view of time in physics in order to seriously begin to develop a unified theory of relativity and quantum mechanics.

Weinberg went on to say, “As long as it could be hoped, as Einstein did hope, that matter would eventually be understood in geometrical terms, it made sense to give Riemannian geometry a primary role in describing the theory of gravitation. But now the passage of time has taught us not to expect that the strong, weak, and electromagnetic interactions

can be understood in geometrical terms, and too great an emphasis on geometry can only obscure the deep connections between gravitation and the rest of physics.” All in all, however popular tenseless time may be in general relativity, we need better reason than popularity and conduciveness to some aspects of physics to reject a tensed view of time.

I said that to have good reason to think that open theism is true concerning the claim that it is impossible to foreknow future free choices, we do not need to *prove* that it is impossible to foreknow those choices. We need only two things. We first

need to accept that time is tensed and that the future is now non-existent. The second thing we need is to recognize that it is more credible to accept that future free choices cannot be foreknown if they do not now exist.

It's easy to accept that one can foreknow future events which are determined. One need only causally determine the course of future events (if one has sufficient power) or know the course of determined present and future causes and effects to produce a final outcome (if one has enough intelligence and access to the workings of the natural processes). But if a free choice can only

be determined by the one making that choice at that time and not by anyone or anything else, including one's past decisions or inclinations, then there is no conceivable way a future free choice can ever be known given tensed time. Since we cannot conceive of a way it can be foreknown, we have better reason to believe that in fact it cannot be foreknown.

The simplest and in my thinking the least problematic understanding of simple foreknowledge of future free choices is that God foreknows them because God sees or perceives them as they occur. This could involve a kind of

backward causation, the event being perceived by God at some time in the past of the event with the event thus causing new knowledge in the mind of God at that prior time.

To make this view work I believe that we should understand that God perceives the future event by perceiving all of time at once or God perceives select portions of the block of space-time at once and other portions “later” in some logical sense. With this, it appears more likely that for any view of simple foreknowledge to work, time must be tenseless. For example, if at time T_1 God foreknows events at time T_2 and if God foreknows

by seeing the events as they occur, then both T_1 and T_2 must *in some sense* be occurring *at the same time*. This fits a tenseless view of time.

Though simple foreknowledge still has other problems given tenseless time, it is no longer as difficult to accept. Molinism, however, still has very serious problems even with tenseless time. It's not merely that God could foresee the future by simply looking at the static block of space-time in front of him, as with simple foreknowledge, God also has to know what free choice one would make without the person ever having the opportunity to make that choice. Given that a non-

determined event like a free choice will never exist to be known if the decision never occurs, Molinism is enormously difficult to conceive of and to accept.

Molinists have sometimes suggested that we might think that someone (P) would choose one course (say, A, to accept God's offer of salvation) under given conditions (Ca), and another course (R, to reject this offer) under other conditions (Cr). So Ca denotes the conditions under which P chooses A and Cr indicates the conditions under which P chooses R. Thus God could know what one's choice would be so long as those conditions

are known. This might cause some to think that the conditions will determine the choices made.

Molinists are quick to deny this however.

Libertarian freedom requires that the decision only accommodate or be present with the conditions under which one happens to choose A or R.

But there may still be confusion here. Some Molinists might say that given certain conditions, say Cr, P would have to *freely* choose R. These conditions include the exact mental state P happens to have at this time up to the point of P making the decision. There can be no variation in this mental state or any other conditions other

than that they are different events. Thus God would always know that P would choose R under conditions Cr and A under conditions Ca.

There is, however, a very serious problem with this explanation. We need to understand that libertarian freedom requires that under conditions Ca the individual could still choose R and under Cr they could still choose A. Freedom means that no matter what one's mental state or other conditions up to the point of the decision making, one still has the ability to choose either of the two options available. So if P chose R under conditions Cr and if God were able to have P

repeat this same experience with conditions Cr being *exactly* the same except for the events occurring at a different time, P *could* still choose A. P's mental state and all other conditions, except for the time, are exactly the same. Thus the possibility of the Molinist view is even more difficult to imagine. We have more than just the problem of how God could know that P would choose R given conditions Cr, given that P would always choose R given Cr. Now, we cannot even say that P would always choose R given conditions Cr.

On a more practical level we should recognize that this would be the case even if there are strong pressures to choose A given Ca and similar pressures to choose R given Cr. These pressures are only influences. They do not determine one's decisions. However, if the decisions for A or R are crucial to one's salvation, God would make sure that the individual (in fact all individuals) not always have to face pressures which diminish one's ability to freely choose. We may still have the ability to freely choose in the face of such pressures in the sense of our being able to stand against such pressures, yet our ability to freely choose may nevertheless be diminished.

If Molinism is not true, we no longer have the common worries and complications Molinism provides about God having to providentially plan the world to be such that the most people choose A or the least choose R, or both. Rather, God would simply allow all people at some time or another the opportunity to freely choose without excessive pressures for or against A or R.

Looking again at simple foreknowledge, I admit that assuming that time is tensed, it may not be possible to prove that it cannot be known what someone will in the future freely choose. I doubt

that I could conclusively prove that a being who knows all that can be known cannot know what that decision will be. I admit that and yet I would want to maintain that because it is so inconceivable that this truth is knowable, we should believe that it is not knowable. (One unknowable future truth is that the individual P will in the future freely choose A in a choice between options A and R—if indeed P happens to choose A.)

The traditional Christian view of divine foreknowledge does include the belief that God does foreknow future free choices. Some

traditional views also accept that God foreknows what one would freely choose even if the choice never occurs. Now someone might complain that the new open theist view of foreknowledge makes God less knowledgeable than the traditional one. Shouldn't we select a definition which sees God as greater, if only to a very small degree? To say that God knows future free choices rather than that God does not does seem to be an advance in God's knowledge. Also, for God to know what we would freely choose even without our so choosing is again an addition to the vast repository of God's knowledge. But is this advantage, this claimed increase in knowledge, worth anything?

Remember that theologians have long claimed that God cannot do the logically impossible. Logical contradictions arise when we say that God can do something like create a square circle. And we don't see it as making God less powerful if God could not create a square circle. If it is truly logically impossible for God to foreknow future free choices, then it is no loss to God's greatness to accept this limitation on God's foreknowledge. As we have seen already, it is by far the more feasible view, given a tensed view of time, that God does not foreknow free choices. And our normal tensed view of time should be assumed

until we find good reason to think that time is tenseless. Since it is more feasible to think that God cannot foreknow free choices, it could be that it is logically impossible to do so, though we simply cannot at present demonstrate this logical impossibility.

Another accusation against open theism is that God cannot as easily work out his determined plans for history if God does not foreknow future free choices. I will argue that this is not true when we look at some of the biblical texts which some claim demonstrate God has foreknowledge of future free choices.

Occasionally open theism will be criticized as claiming that God learns things over time that God didn't know previously. Shouldn't this be absent from any acceptable view of God's omniscience? But given simple foreknowledge, God also *learns* by means of foreseeing freely chosen events. Even with Molinism God needed to *learn* what we will or would do by simply having chosen prior to creation to foreknow what we would choose to do in any given situation. So this accusation seems very weak.

Because the Scripture and the philosophical arguments we have looked at so far show open theism to be more likely than the traditional views of foreknowledge, the traditional views must be supported by other means—they need support from other Scripture or one must appeal to tradition. Both of these supports fail however. We will look at scriptural passages which some would claim indicate that God does have knowledge of future free choices which occur as well as some which may not occur and we will see that they can all too easily be understood quite differently. They are too weak to claim that the Bible teaches that God's omniscience includes foreknowledge of

actual and potential free choices. We will also see that Christian tradition cannot be used to justify either Molinism or simple foreknowledge over open theism. Last of all, we should look at a few rational difficulties some will point out with open theism.

What might be said about Christian tradition in support of Molinism or simple foreknowledge? Simply put, appeal to tradition is a foundation planted firmly in mid-air. Christianity is a religion based on the teachings of Jesus and his immediate followers. We have reason to accept Jesus' teachings because of evidence that

demonstrates that he is the promised Jewish Messiah, evidence such as that of the resurrection and messianic prophecy. William Lane Craig's *On Guard for Students* might be the best place to look for an introduction to this kind of evidence. We have also looked at one of the strongest messianic prophecies elsewhere on this website. If it can be sufficiently demonstrated that this is the Messiah, then he would have been sent from God and thus his teachings should be accepted as being from God. We also have good reason to think that Jesus taught that the Hebrew Scripture is authoritative and that his closest

immediate followers would be given new information from God (John 14:26; 16:13).

The New Testament writings of Paul are a basis of Christian belief as well, in this case because the original apostles (Jesus' immediate followers) stated that Paul had the authority to give information he had received from them as well as that which God gave him directly (Gal 1:11–12, 15–20; 2:1–2, 6–9). After these individuals and possibly a couple of others who also were accepted as apostles (e.g., James and possibly Jude), there was no one who had the authority to do more than pass on what Jesus and the

apostles taught. Paul wrote that the church is the pillar and foundation of the truth (1 Tim 3:15).

Pillars and foundations uphold and support what has been placed upon them, they do not provide or create something new. We have reason to accept these teachings and whatever else reason requires of us, but nothing more. Jesus had very strong words for those who dared to make their own teachings equal to that of God's revelation in the Hebrew Scripture (Mark 7:5–9). Taking his words seriously, Christians have no right to take as authoritative anything other than Jesus' and the first apostles' teachings.

We have nothing in Jesus' or the apostles' teachings which tell us that any who followed after them, even those on whom the apostles laid hands and anointed to do God's work, would have the authority to give new teachings other than that which the apostles handed down. So the fact that the church had later developed a doctrine of omniscience which includes the claim that God knows our future free choices does not give us reason to believe it. As Jesus taught, all such speculation must be considered nothing more than the teachings of men. Reason may indeed bring us to accept or reject any such teaching, but

we have no right to accepted it on any other grounds.

We still have found no good reason to accept the traditional definition of divine foreknowledge over the open theist meaning or to claim that only the traditional meaning applies to God.

We need to now look at some passages that are commonly cited to claim that God does have knowledge of future free choices, whether those choices actually take place or not. Jesus' prediction of Judas' betrayal or Peter's denial of Jesus are claimed to be good examples of

foreknowledge of free choices which do occur (John 6:70–71; Matt 26:21–25, 47; Mark 14:27–31, 66–72). But we will see that passages like these fail to demonstrate simple foreknowledge.

Romans 1 speaks of people choosing evil so often or adamantly that God eventually gives them over to their desires so that they are thereafter bound to their decision (1:21–25, 28–32; cf. 2 Thess 2:9–12). Because God patiently calls all people to himself to forsake their sins (Rom 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9), God would not hand them over to be bound by their desires until God has determined that they have rejected God so

continuously and so strongly that they have reached the limit of what he will allow. Some may not necessarily reach a point of full reprobation while they might still be unable to make a free choice of a certain kind after having freely made a number of evil choices of that kind. Likewise, some people may make certain good choices so often that their hearts become set and thereafter they can choose only that good. God takes away their ability to freely choose concerning that issue.

It is very important that many of our moral choices as well as choices which specifically affect our relationship with God be free choices.

But not *all* such choices need be free. If God withholds from us the ability to freely make a moral choice, we will not be held accountable for that choice unless our decision follows from earlier free choices we had made.

In the Gospels we find the account of Jesus predicting that Judas would betray him, and Judas in fact does so. Jesus even tells Judas directly that he will betray him (Matt 26:21–25). How can Jesus know this if he does not foreknow Judas' free choices? From what we have discussed so far we should see that we don't know that this was a free choice on Judas' part. During an earlier

time in Judas' life, had he not consistently made certain evil choices, his will would not have become set and God would have chosen another person to be Jesus' future betrayer. God did not want Judas to be the one who would betray Jesus and incur this kind of guilt just as God did not want anyone else to have to commit this sin. But because there was always someone available who had committed enough evil so that their will had been seared, there was no problem finding someone to fill the betrayer's shoes. God would have rather there had been no one who had so seared their will so that they could become the betrayer. So Judas could have by his free choice

refrained from betraying Jesus though that choice would have essentially been made at an earlier time in his life.

Note that John 17:12 does not say that Judas was destined to be lost before birth, as some translations suggest, but rather it simply calls him the “son of perdition.” The commentary we find in the New Testament and the biblical prophecies which speak of Judas and his betrayal do not say that the betrayer has to be a particular individual known before birth or that their act of betrayal has to be freely chosen when it occurs (cf. also John

13:18–30; Ps 109:8; Zech 11:12–13; Matt 27:9–10; Acts 1:16–20, 25).

We need to next look at the biblical story of Joseph (Gen 37, 39–47). Joseph's brothers hated him because their father loved him more than them and because Joseph had dreams indicating that they would all submit to him. The brothers sold Joseph into slavery and deceived their father into thinking he was killed. This is another purported example of a biblical account demonstrating that God foreknows future free choices. Had the brothers not *freely* chosen to sell Joseph to slave traders, Jacob's family would not

have been saved by emigrating to Egypt and God's plan would have been thwarted. Since God foreknew what they would freely do, God used this knowledge to plan their future migration to Egypt.

But the account can also be understood very differently. Some of Jacob's sons had made certain evil choices earlier in their lives so that their wills would later become set. Under the right circumstances later on they would not have the ability to choose other than they had. Given their earlier evil choices they could not later refuse to sell Joseph into slavery. Had they not earlier

made the evil choices, they would not have been so provoked to anger by their father's favoritism or Joseph's dreams so as to sell him into slavery; the brothers could have been free to choose other than they had but then God's plan could have failed. So depending on those earlier decisions, God may have had to make other plans to get Jacob's family moved to Egypt. Notice that God can easily achieve the final goal he had determined and still allow people to exercise their free will. They simply do not always exercise their free choice for all morally significant decisions they make.

Molinists often bring up another biblical account which they believe demonstrates that God foreknows future free choices which could occur but in fact do not occur. At one time in Israel's history, David, who would one day become king, was a fugitive running from the current king, Saul. David led a number of fighting men who carried out attacks on Israel's enemies. At one time David and his men were in the walled city of Keilah and Saul heard that he was there. David heard that Saul was on his way with his army to attack the city to kill him. David inquired of God by means of a divining device, an ephod, asking whether the people of the city would deliver him over to Saul.

God told David that Saul was on his way and that the people would indeed hand him over. David leaves the city and Saul hears of it and discontinues his march to Keilah. So even though the people never had the opportunity to hand David over to Saul, God knew that they would have *freely* done so had they been given the opportunity (1 Sam 23:4–13).

The problem with this reading of the story should be obvious from the other examples we've looked at. We have no reason to think that the people of Keilah were free to refrain from handing David over to Saul. Enough of the people in this

city who had the power to hand David over had made decisions earlier in their lives which determined what their actions would be should they face this kind of situation.

The Roman governor, Pilate, tried Jesus and had him executed. In the Gospel accounts it appears that Pilate did not want to kill him, probably more out of animosity toward the Jewish leaders than attraction to Jesus, but did so only after they threatened him. There is good evidence that this occurred in 33 CE at a time when Pilate was very much at the mercy of the Jewish leaders. Had this occurred even a couple of years

earlier, he would likely have ignored them.

Josephus tells us that at one time when Pilate saw that a riot was imminent he sent out soldiers dressed as common people among the crowd but with clubs hidden under their robes. At his signal the soldiers began clubbing those around them.

(Josephus *Jewish Wars* 2.9.4) One of the Gospels also mentions a similar action by Pilate (Luke 13:1). But then after 31 Tiberius ordered the governors throughout the empire not to mistreat the Jews and he later reprimanded Pilate for certain actions which offended the Jews. (Hoehner's work, *Chronological Aspects*, 109–110 gives evidence for the date for Tiberius' order and reprimand. On 95–114 Hoehner argues very persuasively for a 33 CE crucifixion date.) **By the time of the**

later event Pilate knew he had to be careful not to offend the Jewish leaders. At Jesus' trial the Jewish leaders told Pilate that if he would release Jesus he would be honoring a king other than Caesar (John 19:12, 14). Pilate also knew they very possibly would inform Caesar should he fail to execute Jesus. It also appeared that a riot was fermenting for which Pilate did not want to be held responsible (Matt 27:24).

Imagine the earlier life decisions Pilate made which determined his later decisions. Because of Pilate's early decisions, God knew he would be an excellent choice to be a governor in Judea who

would have Jesus executed given the appropriate environment. Had Pilate earlier determined in his own mind only to do what was right no matter what the cost, God would not have selected him to be the future Roman governor. Possibly Pilate instead made early moral choices which confirmed in his mind, whether consciously or unconsciously, to do what he thought was right unless it was too costly to his position or safety.

Critics of open theism often claim that the openist reading of texts like these are not the more obvious or straightforward readings. But there is nothing in these passages which indicate

that the individuals considered—Judas, Peter, Joseph’s brothers, the people of Keilah, Pilate, or anyone else—were making free choices when their actions fulfilled God’s plans or prophecies. The openist view that these choices were not free choices offers a completely straightforward and fitting understanding of these events. There do need to be some free decisions which we make which determine our moral nature and our standing before God. But many of our moral decisions merely follow from and are determined by free choices we have already made. It is not necessary that all of our choices, even all of our moral choices, be free.

I think that in fact very few of our choices are actually free. Philosopher (and Molinist) William Lane Craig has commented that were he to offer his wife the choice of a plate of cooked liver or a plate of chocolate chip cookies, he knows very well exactly what she would choose. Might it be that she does not truly freely choose at that point given the proper environment but that her decision is set by previous choices and motivations?

I said earlier that if God does not foreknow our future free choices, God can just as easily work

out his predetermined plans for history. We now see how this can occur given the scriptural examples we have looked at. But we should also look at a similar argument which claims to show that God would not be able to work his will providentially in history if we lack stronger views of foreknowledge, that is, simple foreknowledge or Molinism.

Suppose, for example, that God wants to protect someone (P) but the ruling authority (H) of the town in which P finds himself decides, freely, to have P killed. If God foreknew H would make this decision, God could forewarn P, but God

couldn't do so if God does not foreknow future free choices. Isn't this a disadvantage which hinders God effectively planning for the course of history? No. God could warn P before the authorities capture P but after H makes his decision. In fact, any way we look at it, there are very obvious ways for God to protect P without having foreknowledge of future free choices.

I can even put some flesh on our hypothetical actors and recall the New Testament story of Peter escaping from Herod (Acts 12). In this account James the brother of John had already been killed by Herod. Peter was in prison at night

and about to be executed, probably the next day. God sends an angel to put the guards to sleep, break some chains, and open the locked doors to let Peter escape. (Did you notice how I exercised my own special limited foreknowledge to name our actors P and H as in Peter and Herod?)

Is there any way we can save the story to have an advantage for simple foreknowledge? Suppose P is standing directly in H's presence when H decides to kill P. God can't warn him before the authorities catch him since he has already been caught and he can't escape as he did from prison. But again we have interesting examples from

Scripture of similar situations. After offending some people in Nazareth, Jesus was taken to something like a cliff near the town to be thrown off of it and killed. Before any harm could be done, however, we are told that Jesus simply walked through the crowd (Luke 4:28–30). Either Jesus said something to make the people think better of their intended action or they were in some way supernaturally blinded or immobilized. We have other instances in the Scripture of God blinding people; in a couple of instances it was to protect someone from violence (viz. Gen 19:4–11 and 2 Kings 6:13–14, 18). Obviously, God could strike H

and his guards with blindness if he wanted P to escape.

To paint a more realistic overall scenario, we should remember that few decisions occur without prior reflection. H, Herod, likely thought about what he would do before making his decision to kill Peter. Given open theism, before Herod made his decision, God would have known what could easily develop and God could have forewarned Peter to leave the area. So there were many options open to God given open theism to accomplish exactly what God desired, in this case to have Peter escape from Herod.

Perhaps God didn't forewarn Peter because he wanted a more dramatic rescue from prison to assure him and the church of his power and complete control of the situation. God was likely dealing with and testing Herod as well. Sixteen armed guards who had very strong motive for keeping Peter captive—they would normally be executed if they didn't—would not willingly let him go free. Herod should have recognized the hand of God in this escape. Instead he very foolishly carried out normal Roman policy and had the guards killed (Acts 12:4, 19).

Assuming any scenario we might think of, I don't see any way God could not carry out any of his plans for history given open theism. (God's determined goals cannot in any case include human choices which determine their salvation. Such actions must be determined by the individual.)

We have just a few more biblical texts to look at before we come to any conclusions as to the more biblical view of foreknowledge. It may be argued that more substantial biblical passages allowing that God foreknows future free choices might be found in Genesis 15:13–16, in

Revelation 13:8 and 17:8, and in Romans 8:29–30. After considering these we will look at some final passages and objections which bear on the subject.

Revelation 13 speaks of either some whose names are not written in the Book of Life from the foundation of the world or of the Lamb of God who was slain from the foundation of the world. From this passage alone it is not at all clear which is being claimed and English translations will differ as to how the text is read. So the passage could either say, essentially, “there are some who do not have their names written in the Book of Life of the

Lamb who was slain from the foundation of the earth,” or “there are some who from the foundation of the earth do not have their names written in the Book of Life—the Book of Life of the Lamb who was slain.”

Let’s first assume that this passage is speaking of the Lamb being slain from the foundation of the earth. This is the more likely meaning of the verse syntactically. (Mounce, *New International Commentary: Revelation*, 252.) This could mean that the Lamb is foreknown or decreed to be slain from the beginning of creation. Or God the Son may have suffered pain and death, possibly a kind of metaphysical separation

from the Father at this time (or timelessly, if that is possible) and these events were transposed into a point in time and space 2000 years ago to also occur then. In any case, it sounds as though God foreknew or decreed the fall, Adam and Eve's free choice to sin which brought sin to the human race. The Lamb of God is slain, according to the book of Revelation, to atone for sin (cf. Rev 1:5; 5:8–9). If the Lamb is slain before the sin occurs, that sin must be foreknown or decreed by God to occur.

Notice first of all that the passage does not say the Lamb is slain *before* the foundation of the earth. Secondly, if we look closely at the text and

some related passages, they need not indicate that this event occurred prior to Adam and Eve's sin. All of the events at the time of the beginning, including the creation and fall of the first couple, are seen in the Scripture as the same general group of events (see e.g. Prov 8:23; Isa 40:21; Matt 19:4; Mark 10:6; Luke 11:50; John 8:44; Heb 9:26; 2 Pet 3:4; 1 John 3:8). The slaying of the Lamb from the foundation of the earth, or God's foreknowledge or decreeing of this event, is an event in the same category of events as the fall, not an event occurring before the fall. So the passage need not mean that the Lamb was foreknown or decreed to die before the fall.

Likewise it need not mean that he actually does die in some metaphysically or spiritually unique manner prior to the fall with this event being transposed into a point of time and space in Jerusalem in 33 CE. For the latter also would require a foreknowledge or predestining of the fall before it occurs. The Lamb could be foreknown to die, be decreed to die, or actually endure death from the foundation of the earth and yet such events could all be seen as part the wider events of the creation and fall. They all happened together as the same category of events.

We now need to consider the possibility that this passage, Revelation 13:8, is saying that some people do not have their names written in the Book of Life from the creation of the world. If it doesn't say this, we should notice that Revelation 17:8 definitely does. Some may see this as proving either a predestining unto damnation or God foreknowing exactly who would be lost before they have any chance to make a choice concerning their relationship with God. Those who do not have their names written in the Book of Life at the time of the judgment are punished in a lake of fire (Rev 20:11–15). Whether they are permanently or only temporarily condemned, or

whether their punishment is or is not eventually diminish or changed, they are at the very least to be seen as those we might call *the lost* according to the Bible. (If this damnation is temporary or eventually diminished or changed, then the lost may eventually become the redeemed. These alternatives we have discussed in *Flirting with Universalism*.)

But this does not necessarily require a foreknowledge or predestining of the lost or the redeemed. It could be claimed that *no one* has their name written in the Book of Life from the time of the events of the creation and fall since

this is everyone's condition before accepting God's salvation. Having their name written in the Book of Life depends on their choices at some time after their earthly life begins.

It is certainly possible that these passages indicate that God foreknew the evil choices of these people and that their names were not written in the Book of Life because of this foreknowledge. But it is *no less likely*, so far as we can know, that no foreknowledge is involved. Thus again, we have no stronger scriptural evidence that God foreknows future free choices than that

God does not, and we have several passages which better fit the view that God does not.

Romans 8:29–30 speaks of some whom God foreknew to inevitably be saved, but it does not say they were foreknown before some point in their lives at which they would make the decision or decisions which would determine their salvation. It could be that they are foreknown to finally be saved or irresistibly chosen such that they will inevitably be accepted by God but only *after* and on the basis of their decisions to repent and to accept God's offer of salvation. We are not told what this foreknowledge precedes. This

passage does not tell us that all believers have this *eternal security* so it may also be that something of the quality or character of the decisions of certain Christians is what makes the difference for them alone. Other believers may eventually be lost depending on their later decisions.

Also recall that I have argued that some people make free decisions which will determine their later decisions. So some may have made moral decisions and decisions to seek or honor or fear God which God sees as binding as to their salvation. Their later decision to accept God's

offer of reconciliation may simply follow from the earlier free decision and in fact that later decision may not be a free decision itself. God may thus foreknow one's future decision to accept God's offer of salvation when God sees (not foreknows) those earlier decisions.

Another possibility is that this passage is telling us that *all* people are irresistibly predestined by God to be finally accepted by God. Under this reading they could be predestined since the foundation of the world. All of these alternate interpretations show us that it is far from necessary that this passage indicates that God

irresistibly chose only a select number of individuals to be saved or that God foreknew our decision to accept God's offer of salvation before we were created.

Ephesians 1:4–5 does speak of some who are chosen and predestined to salvation from the time of creation. But it is not clear that these individuals are *irresistibly* chosen as are those in Romans 8. If they are not irresistibly chosen, this passage is simply telling us that God desires and calls all people to be reconciled to God and thus any of these people could resist and reject God's offer. On the other hand, if they are irresistibly chosen

by God, it is not clear that the chosen do not include all people. Some have taken this passage to mean that only certain people are inevitably predestined on the basis of God's foreknowledge of their future choice to receive God's offer of salvation. But again, with all that we have considered so far, either of the other possible interpretations we have looked at are no less likely. And the other earlier passages we have looked at indicate that God does not foreknow free choices.

Romans 9 is often taken as a presentation of the strongest case for God's unconditional

election of some to eternal salvation and others to damnation. If God has mercy on whom he will have mercy and hardens whom he wishes to harden (9:18), and if for a while he puts up with those who are vessels of wrath prepared for destruction (9:22), it sounds as though we have absolutely no choice in the matter. But then we notice that Paul clarifies his statement just two chapters later when he tells us that *all* are consigned to disobedience so that God might have mercy on *all* (11:32). We are all by nature vessels or children of wrath (Eph 2:3) yet we all receive mercy.

Having “mercy on all” must mean more than merely that God gives some people temporal blessings in this life alone. If someone were to be eternally condemned or annihilated or otherwise separated from God, it hardly makes sense to talk about God blessing them in this life. The ultimate harm they endure so infinitely diminishes this trivial mercy that the term, *mercy*, becomes meaningless.

Romans 11:32 must also mean more than that all different *categories* of people, namely Gentiles as well as Jews, receive God’s mercy. Just because the context of this verse happens to be

speaking of Jews and Gentiles is no reason to negate the more obvious meaning of the word *all*. It means absolutely everyone. If this verse can be taken to mean simply that all different kinds of people, but not necessarily everyone, receive God's mercy, then shouldn't we also read Romans 3:23 as saying that it is not necessarily true that everyone has sinned? The context there is speaking about Jews and Gentiles as well. Why deny the more obvious meaning of one verse because of a contextual artifact but not the other verse?

Furthermore, if 11:32 means only that God has mercy on all categories of people, shouldn't it follow that the antecedent, those God consigned to disobedience, should also consist of nothing more than *all categories of people*? Shouldn't a consistent Calvinistic reading of this verse allow for the possibility that some people have never been disobedient to God? It is ironic that a consistently Calvinistic hermeneutic might so easily lead to such an extreme form of Pelagianism (a form even Pelagius repudiated). No, the only feasible meaning of this passage is that God has mercy on all people without exception just as all people without exception

have been disobedient. Acts 10:34–35 tells us that God has absolutely no partiality but that *in every nation* God accepts *the one* who fears God and does what is right. I've claimed earlier that anyone who fears or honors God and seeks to do right will discover that Christianity is true and will eventually trust in Jesus for salvation. But my point here is that Acts 10 confirms our understanding of Romans 11:32 that God has mercy on absolutely everyone without exception by, at the very least, offering salvation to all.

We have no reason to blame God for binding anyone to disobedience, as Paul pointed out

earlier (Rom 9:19–21), since now we see that ultimately this binding brings about God’s mercy to all. And even this universal binding need not have occurred had the first human couple not chosen to sin. The mercy that resulted from this binding must at least be the offer of salvation to all people. One whom God has made a vessel of wrath (Rom 9:21–22) can, by one’s choice, become a vessel of God’s mercy (Eph 2:3–5).

Paul does distinguish between some who are called vessels of wrath and some vessels of mercy (Rom 9:22–24) but here he could merely be speaking of God consigning each according to

their choices to accept or reject God's offer of salvation. Such choices involving their relationship with God may also have been made earlier in their lives, choices made before clearly accepting or rejecting God's offer of salvation. We've just seen that some of these *consignings* are not irreversible conditions. There is no point to God's patiently enduring the vessels prepared for destruction, the vessels of wrath (9:22), unless this patient calling and long waiting are meant to bring them to repentance (Rom 2:4).

In chapter 9 Paul says it does not depend on human choice or effort but on God's mercy (9:16)

and that God hardens whom he will (9:18). But then he uses the same terms in chapter 11: the *elect* of the remnant of Israel are *chosen* by grace (11:5, 7) and obtained salvation but the rest, the Jews who reject Jesus and trust in their works, God *hardened* (11:7) giving them a spirit of stupor, deafness, and blindness (11:8). Then Paul tells us clearly that these unelected, these hardened reprobates have not fallen beyond recovery (11:11) and that God can graft them back into the stalk of God's chosen people *if they do not remain in disbelief* (11:23). By their choice they become the chosen and elect. The hardened of chapter 9 are the same as the hardened of chapter 11.

Again we see that those God has hardened in Chapter 9, the vessels of wrath, can by their choice become vessels of mercy and be grafted into the stalk of God's elect people. We see that it is by the free choice of the individual that one becomes one of the elect.

When Paul says it does not depend on human choice or effort but on God's mercy (9:16), this means that nothing we can do is sufficient to save us; everything depends on the fact that God has mercy on all (11:32). But there may be more to this mercy God offers everyone in Romans 11:32. It may also include the final inalterable salvation

of all people. It may be that all vessel of wrath will *inevitably* become a vessel of mercy. The text itself does not tell us definitely though it does give universalist hints. (E.g., compare Rom 11:26 with Acts 10:34. Paul tells us that in the end, all of these hardened Jews will be saved.) For something stronger than mere universalist hints, one will have to look elsewhere (e.g., Col 1:16, 19–20; Eph 1:9–10; Rev 5:13).

We have covered only a few of the very serious problems with the Augustinian/Calvinistic interpretations of some of their most important proof-texts. These problems plus some other

passages we have looked at show us that God does not arbitrarily choose some to salvation and others to damnation, but they also show us that none of these passages demonstrate divine foreknowledge of free choices.

Genesis 15 includes an account of God's promise to Abraham that he would have a son and that his descendants would become a great nation and inhabit much of the western Levant, the land Abraham was living in at the time. The prophecy speaks of another unnamed nation enslaving Abraham's future descendants and then God punishing them. This nation turns out to be

Egypt. Likewise God said that the wickedness of the Amorites, whom the Israelites will displace, was not yet complete and that because of God's justice he did not choose to judge them until their wickedness would come to full fruition. When God spoke to Abraham, the specific generations of the Egyptian and Amorite people about whom God spoke did not yet even exist to have a prior history of evil which might determine their later evil actions. How can these Egyptian and Amorite generations be free not to sin in the ways God had foretold unless God simply sees or knows ahead of time what they will freely choose?

If all people are consigned to disobedience such that all people do inevitably sin, as Paul claims (Rom 3:23; 11:32), then it is a matter of what physical and social environment God places them in that will determine generally how they will sin. God essentially creates numerous individuals who, being in Adam, carry on the choice to sin Adam made. It's almost as though God created them by dividing Adam into numerous individuals or clones (in the popular understanding of the term) except that it is primarily Adam's choice to sin which is passed on. Being in Adam, we all committed the sin Adam committed. Under this view, God would be obligated to offer a means of

salvation, removal of sin, for all of the descendants of Adam--and this we see God has done (Rom 11:32). God can allow a world in which we all inevitably sin and in which we can still be responsible for those choices. Many of the sins of the Amorites and Egyptians they were unable to avoid and yet they were responsible for those choices. Certain Egyptians were thus responsible for their sin of enslaving the Israelites even if they were unable to do otherwise and God punished them for this sin.

Our inherited sin nature and any sins we commit that result from that sin nature which are not

under our power or control, will result in our punishment. However whatever suffering that entails will be compensated and redeemed for all of those willing to accept this redemption. The suffering which results from our being punished will then have the same purpose as undeserved suffering has under the Observer and Recipient Oriented Theodicy. It will be a test as to how we will respond to God in our suffering or to others in their suffering. Also, there could have been some mistreatment of the Israelites which resulted from the free actions of some of the Egyptians.

Because many Egyptians were tempted to participate in these evils, freely taking advantage

of the Israelite oppression to mistreat them, the Agent Oriented Theodicy (what we normally call the Free Will Theodicy or Defense) would also be involved. God tested them to see if they would do evil or good.

But this does not entirely answer the problem. God speaks as though the Amorites would become especially evil and that they deserved to be completely destroyed as national entities. Doesn't this indicate extremely great sins that could have been avoided but which God foreknew? Wouldn't this indicate foreknown freely chosen evil?

One possible answer to this problem for the open theist view is to recognize that an institutionalized evil may become sufficiently engrained early on so that it will expand beyond any human power to halt or diminish. By this mechanism a population can also become increasingly evil to the point of being intolerable to God. Wicked rulers may institute procedures by which only other corrupt political leaders, especially those who encourage this evil, will continue to take power. Or other social mechanisms may be put in place to assure this end. With this, the institutionalized evil will

continue and grow. Also, good people who oppose such evils will be eliminated or strongly pressured to emigrate (if this option is available) or they will accept the evil. So good people opposing such evils will diminish in that society.

Archeological and historical accounts indicate that the Canaanites may have practiced horrific evils like child sacrifice. This may have been an institutionalized evil which had well established social mechanisms allowing it to grow and to reduce the number of good people opposing this evil. Once this evil became too great, God determined that the population must be destroyed

or dispersed so that the evil will be far less likely to become established again. So the punishment of the Amorites was more of a means to stop a great evil which would not have been present in a normal society with its normal cultural restraints. Evil people are usually somewhat constrained from the amount of evil they can do. With certain changes in the culture, they are able to do much greater evils. God is not as much judging them for their greater evil as replacing the culture so that these evils do not continue. The evil societies must be brought to an end. All of their members had to be killed or dispersed to other societies, societies in which they would not have the power

to reenact the evil laws and mores they had before. A more complete look at the problem of the Canaanite conquest, particularly God's purported command to innocent children, is included in *Human Suffering and the Evil of Religion*.

It wasn't that God foreknew that the people would freely choose to increase their sins to such wicked extremes but rather God foresaw that the social mechanisms in place allowing these evils would unalterably develop to these extremes. And then the institutionalized evils would only continue

until the nations were destroyed. They could not be stopped by any other means.

Occasionally passages like 1 John 3:20, “God knows *all things*,” are brought up to claim that foreknowledge of future free choices or middle knowledge cannot be outside of God’s knowledge. To answer this claim we should first understand the context of this verse. It is concerned with God’s knowledge of our deepest motives and resolves and our knowledge that we have asked for and have God’s forgiveness in the face of our own tendency to self-condemnation. John likely used this blanket statement, that God knows

everything, to show that God also knows, as we should know, that we have no reason to condemn ourselves.

John was not thinking about whether something like a free human decision which has not yet been made actually fits the category of *all things*. If this is something which does not yet exist to be known and is impossible to know, then it cannot fit that category.

I've pointed out that it is no denial of God's omnipotence to say that God cannot do the logically impossible. When Scripture says God

can do all things, it is assumed that the logically impossible is not included. When Jesus prayed to God to take the cup of his coming suffering from him, to keep him from having to die because, as he said, God can do all things (Mark 14:36), he was aware that this may not be God's will. It could only be God's will that Jesus suffer and die if God could not bring about the end God wanted, atonement, without this death. That was something God could not do. But in the same manner we can say that God can "know all things" and yet there may be some truths which are not actually *things* which God can know or can be known. Just as God can do all things and yet God

cannot bring about the end God desires, atonement, without Jesus dying, so God can know all things and yet not know some truths which do not technically fit the category of *all things*. As God can do all things, but this does not include all things which are logically impossible to do, so God can know all things but this does not include all things which are logically impossible to know.

There are some passages which seem to indicate God reacts with disappointment and even surprise at human actions. Now it isn't clear that God couldn't feel disappointment given simple

foreknowledge or Molinism. Prior to creation, given Molinism, God knew all of the evil that would occur if he were to create conscious creatures in every feasible world God might create. God could have always felt sadness and even regret while at the same time feeling joy knowing the ultimate good that would inevitably come to be in the best world he would create. As a result, God knew what we would do and yet God knew that through it all it would be overwhelmingly worth it to bring us into existence. Thus God chose to create.

If God had only simple foreknowledge prior to creation, once God foreknew the future, he could have felt disappointment at human actions. Of course once God foreknew anything (in the sense of foreseeing that it would occur), it had to occur. So there had to be some point chronologically prior or logically prior to creation when God did not foreknow all that would occur. It was then that God decided whether to create and if so what to create. At that point God knew it could be as bad as it is now or even worse and yet God chose to create because of the good that would also come. So before foreknowing the creation God also had regret and sadness knowing what evils could

come to be by human choice and yet God also had great joy. God knew that occasional, maybe even many instances of good or evil could occur along the way but God also knew that whatever evil would occur, an overwhelmingly greater good would finally come of this creation.

This also fits the open theist view. Before creation God knew that we *could* fall into such evil as has and will occur and felt great regret and sadness at this possibility. God also knew that if we would it would still be worth it to incarnate as a man and to die to bring us back to God. God knew the final overwhelmingly greater good which

would occur. God also felt regret and sadness once we actually chose to fall into such great sin. Without our fall the atonement wouldn't (or may not) have been necessary. It would have been better had there been no fall and it would certainly have been better had the world contained no sin at all. (Even without a fall there could have been sin in the world if God allowed each person the choice to do good or evil.) Yet God knew that whether the fall would occur or not, it would be better to create us than not to do so.

Under open theism, simple foreknowledge, and Molinism, before choosing to create, God felt

extreme sadness and regret as well as the greatest joy at the great evil and good which would or could occur. With this knowledge God chose to create. Now and throughout eternity God will always feel the same.

Given open theism, God would have experienced a degree of surprise when humans did some horrendous evil. Under Molinism or simple foreknowledge, when God is said to experience surprise this would simply be an expression of the surprise God experienced before creation when he foresaw what some would or will do. So God's experience of surprise

in those cases was merely a kind of transposition of an earlier emotion God experienced to a later time (or perhaps *into time* itself). In all of these views including open theism it should be said that God isn't actually surprised as we would be since God knows fully what humans are capable of freely choosing. And yet we still might say that God experienced a kind of surprise.

Only given Calvinism would God have no surprise or lack of knowledge of human actions at all since God completely determines all human choices and actions. Some Calvinists see this as an advantage for their view. They think it extols

the greatness of God not to have to follow “Plan B” should “Plan A” fail. Always and only will Plan A occur since God has so chosen. For a truly worthy God, they think, there can be no Plan B. From a non-Calvinist, non-Molinist view, Plan A was that neither Adam and Eve nor anyone else would sin and thus the incarnation and atonement would not have been necessary. Plan B was that God would incarnate if Plan A did not occur. For the Calvinist, Plan A was always for humankind to fall into sin, for the amount of sin and evil which has occurred and will occur to occur, for God to incarnate and atone for some and not for anyone else, and for only some to be finally accepted by God. God was

never surprised at any of this since God planned it all.

This seems to me a very shallow honor or glory to assign to God. Indeed, it appears to make God's plans for creation a cruel and meaningless game. All of humanity will be consigned to eternal joy or torment solely by God's plan and decision. Why even put us in this world? Why not simply place the chosen saved directly in paradise and the chosen damned in hell once they are created? No, this is not a truly worthy God. Rather, the God who allows human free choice and yet works with those choices to bring about his will, a God whose

will does not determine the salvation of some and the damnation of others, this is a truly worthy God.

Isaiah 5:4 says that God expected good grapes to come from the vineyard he planted. He expected to have a righteous nation after all he had done for Judah. The very poetic nature of this passage makes it difficult for us to believe that God is saying that he actually *believed* his people would live righteously and turn back to him and reject their sins. God knew that humanity had constantly gone astray from its beginning. He

hadn't forgotten that he had once sent a flood to wipe them out because of their wickedness.

Perhaps the closest we can come to understanding this passage is to say that God knew that they could return to him and hoped they would. This understanding is compatible with all of the views of foreknowledge we have considered except Calvin's theological determinism. This we saw when we discussed God being surprised and sad in response to human sin. Much the same can be said of Jeremiah 3:7 where God said he thought Israel would return to him after all of the evil she had done. God can be said to have

hoped for something which did not occur but, for simple foreknowledge and Molinism, God had this hope prior to foreknowing what they will or would do.

Some will claim that open theists bring their own assumptions to the Scripture and do not entirely take the Bible simply for what it says. For example, openists think God has exhaustive knowledge of the past and present but not the future. One could respond that we have looked at several passages which most likely indicate God does not know future free choices but there are none which say he does not know the past or

present completely. And there are some passages from which it seems very reasonable to infer that God does completely know the past and present. Some state this more poetically but others are difficult to read as saying anything other than that God quite literally knows all that can be known.

God numbers the hairs of our heads (Matt 10:29–30); the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of man (1 Cor 1:25); nothing is hidden from God (Heb 4:13); and God sees everywhere (Prov 15:3). God sees all that is in secret and knows what you need before you ask (Matt 6:4–8); none can hide from God because God is near

as well as far (Jer 23:23–25); God declares things not yet done (Isa 46:9–10); there is no limit to God’s understanding (Psalm 147:5); and, as we mentioned earlier, God knows everything (1 John 3:20). The last couple of passages mentioned should at least include everything other than that which might be questioned to be knowable. All in all then, the accusation has little force. Open theists do not bring unwarranted assumptions to Scripture.

The openist is not inconsistent in failing to interpret literally passages which speak of God having hands, eyes, arms, a face, a mouth, etc.

This is because other passages tell us that God is a Spirit or that God fills the heavens and earth (John 4:24; Jer 23:24). The latter, and similar passages like Isaiah 66:1 (“Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool”), are more poetic statements but they certainly tells us that God is not confined to a single physical body. We do have reason to reinterpret the meaning of some passages by the statements of other passages.

Usually passages which speak of God having a face or arms are more poetically presented. More straightforward didactic passages should usually be used to interpret the passages which appear to

be more metaphorical. The arm of God speaks of the strength of God, for example, or the eye of the Lord speaks of God seeing all that occurs in the world. The accounts of Moses seeing God's back speak of his seeing either a true physical being or his seeing God through a vision. God could be invisible or beyond our actual visual experience and still be able to manifest himself in a way that he could be seen. God might even take on a physical form while remaining distinct from this physical body. This manifestation of God could have literal arms and hands and eyes. We might think of the appearance of God to Abraham with

two others on their way to Sodom (Gen 18) or
Isaiah's vision of God on his throne (Isa 6:1).

Looking at the most important biblical passages which have been used to argue that God foreknows the outcome of free choices (future contingents) or future free choices which God need not allow to occur (counterfactuals of creaturely freedom), we see that all of them can too easily have a different interpretation. Open theist, simple foreknowledge, and Molinist views are all possible given these passages alone. We have also seen other passages which more likely indicate that God does not foreknow the outcome

of future free choices. Efforts to claim foreknowledge of future free choices in such passages are extremely strained or unlikely, depending on the passages. These give stronger support to open theism. The Molinist interpretation of some of these passages is harder to support than even the simple foreknowledge view. Though Molinism and simple foreknowledge are not definitely precluded, the open theist view is the stronger possibility. All in all, the open theist view is better evidenced.

The more realistic and biblical view of foreknowledge would say that God knows all

future events that are logically possible to know and none that are logically impossible to know and that there are some future events and possible future events which are logically impossible to know. God foreknows all possible outcomes of all future free choices. God also knows all actual future outcomes of all causal events so long as those outcomes lack any freely chosen decisions in their causal lines and links prior to the event known and following the time it is known.

The Recipient Oriented Free Will Theodicy says that we need to experience suffering in order that

we may become good in a way we could not without our free choice and in order that God would know what our choice will be. If God foreknew Job's decision to be faithful to God by foreseeing Job's actual decision (simple foreknowledge) or if God didn't know whether he would pass the test until the testing was complete (open theism), both of the above reasons for the Recipient Oriented Theodicy (his becoming good by his free choice in the face of suffering and God knowing his choice) would be present. So the Recipient Oriented Theodicy works well given open theism and simple foreknowledge.

I don't want to be too hard on Molinism since even a Molinist form of the Recipient Oriented Theodicy is possible. This theodicy says less than its open theist or simple foreknowledge forms and it is more difficult to see in most of the more clearly openist passages we have looked at.

Given Molinism, God does know whatever free choice we would make before the choice is made. A Molinist view might claim that God does need or at least want to know what that decision will be but it does not require that one endure a test for God to find out. The only reason for having Job suffer would not be as a test but as a means to

make him good in a way he could not become otherwise, by making this moral choice in the face of suffering. What the text appears to present as a true test, isn't really. So one crucial problem with the Molinist approach is that the passages we have looked at which indicate that we need to be tested for God to know what we will choose must be reread to mean something else. The most obvious meaning is rejected without good reason. The other crucial problem with Molinism is that it denies one of the clearest theodicies in the Bible, the Recipient Oriented Theodicy in its simplest and most obvious form.

So we find that the Molinist need not adhere to a testing oriented answer to the problem of undeserved suffering since in any case no actual test is involved. It is only if the Molinist does happen to think that freely choosing to affirm one's commitment to God while enduring suffering is important for one's spiritual growth and standing before God, and this as an answer to the problem of suffering, might they accept a reduced form of the Recipient Oriented Theodicy. Such a theodicy could affirm that God does want to know what we will choose even though it is not discovered by means of the test. It was determined when God chose to know all of the choices potential

creatures would make if they existed. Or if God always knew it, he still desired to have that knowledge. Obviously the Christian Molinist will say that freely choosing to affirm one's commitment to God, whether in the context of suffering or not, is crucial to one's salvation. What they might deny is that this choice applies to the problem of evil and they definitely will deny that the test is needed for God to know what one will choose.

We see that the Recipient Oriented Free Will Theodicy, especially in its stronger open theist or simple foreknowledge forms, has persuasive

support throughout the Bible (though simple foreknowledge has less support). The same can be said about the other testing oriented theodicies as well: the Observer and, to a lesser degree, the Agent Oriented Free Will Theodicies.

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Dennis Jensen, Oct 2017; the first two preliminary paragraph revised and other minor additions March 2018