

## THE HERMENEUTICS OF “OPEN THEISM”

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*Like other recent evangelical innovations, Open Theism has faltered through its use of errant hermeneutical principles. It has adopted a wrong view of general revelation, has allowed preunderstanding to produce a subjectively biased understanding of various texts, has used 1 John 4:8 as an interpretive center for the whole of Scripture, and has followed a discourse analysis approach that fails to take into account the contexts of various statements. Open Theism views the sovereignty of God as limited, an inadequate view that is especially prominent in the way its advocates handle Romans 9–11. A careful tracing of the reasoning of Romans 9 in particular reveals that the open-theistic view that God has surrendered some of His sovereignty is totally unbiblical.*

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At its annual meeting on November 14, 2000, the Executive Committee of the Evangelical Theological Society formulated the following resolution:

The Executive Committee, in response to requests from a group of charter members and others, to address the compatibility of the view commonly referred to as “Open Theism” with biblical inerrancy, wishes to state the following: We believe the Bible clearly teaches that God has complete, accurate and infallible knowledge of all events past, present and future including all future decisions and actions of free moral agents. However, in order to insure fairness to members of the society who differ with this view, we propose the issue of such incompatibility be taken up as part of our discussion in next year’s conference “Defining Evangelicalism’s Boundaries.”

“Open Theism” is one of several innovations that have come to the forefront among evangelicals in recent years.<sup>1</sup> All such innovations have a common thread, that of falling into the pattern of new hermeneutical principles that have become the norm among many evangelicals in about the last twenty years. The following investigation will seek to illustrate how Open Theism is an example of departures from

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<sup>1</sup>Progressive Dispensationalism, Pluralism, Feminism, Self-love Psychology, and Conditional Immortality are among the other systems that have emerged recently in evangelical circles.

traditional grammatical-historical principles of interpretation. The discussion will then focus on the way Open Theism handles the NT teaching of divine sovereignty.

### **Hermeneutical Weaknesses of Open Theism**

#### **(1) A Wrong View of General Revelation**

**Open Theism and general revelation.** Open Theism runs counter to grammatical-historical principles in a number of ways, but most basic to the system is its assumption that “all truth is God’s truth.” This common saying is a hypothesis that repeatedly weaves itself into the system’s discussions of God. Boyd, in treating the topic “Integration of Theology and Recent Scientific Advances,” has penned the following:

As Christians, we of course want our worldview to be fundamentally derived from God’s Word, not the climate of opinion that happens to prevail in the world in which we live. Still, since “all truth is God’s truth,” as Aquinas taught us, we should assume that whatever is true about the views of our culture, including the views of science, will be consistent with God’s Word (assuming we are interpreting it correctly).<sup>2</sup>

The bottom line for Boyd in determining the correct interpretation of God’s Word, in this instance, is how science views a particular theme.

In explaining how the traditional view of God came into orthodox Christian circles, Sanders has written,

[T]hey [early Christian writers] saw a need to proclaim that the Father of Jesus was the universal God and not merely the ethnic God of the Jews. Hence, they sought to demonstrate that the Christian God was the author of all creation according to the idea of the universal God articulated by the philosophers. . . . Moreover, they [the fathers] desired to show that the God of the Bible was the universal God, that this God was compatible with the best thinking of their day, and the Christ God was the fulfillment of the God sought by the philosophers.<sup>3</sup>

Whether Sanders’ characterization of Christianity’s early fathers is accurate or not, he approves of the principle of interpreting the Scriptures in line with the findings of philosophy when he later says, “[N]ot all philosophy is bad.”<sup>4</sup> He credits philosophy with positive effects: “Philosophical theology can lend clarity to concepts about the divine nature and providence that can be useful to the biblical

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<sup>2</sup>Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 107.

<sup>3</sup>John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994) 59-60, 72.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 100.

scholars.”<sup>5</sup> He feels that biblical scholars need philosophy in order to do their job properly.

Pinnock joins Sanders in approving the principle “all truth is God’s truth”:

No one should criticize the fathers for trying to integrate current philosophical beliefs and biblical insights. If God is the God of the universe and if truth is one, theologians should try to integrate all of the truth that they know from any quarter. But it is essential to integrate the various insights in such a way that the biblical message is not negated or compromised. In the integration the insights of revelation must be normative and not swept aside.<sup>6</sup>

He later adds, “While open to everything that is good in Greek thinking, we must discard what is not good.”<sup>7</sup>

Hasker has summarized the issue: “It is apparent from the historical survey that philosophy bears part of the blame for obscuring the biblical conception of God, so it is fitting that philosophy should also have a part in the work of restoration.”<sup>8</sup> He charges the early church with using bad philosophy in formulating the traditional doctrine of God and implies that “Open Theism” uses good philosophy to correct the error. His words expand on this:

I don’t wish to create the impression that I think it was simply a mistake for the early fathers to utilize the resources of Greek philosophy in formulating the Christian conception of God. On the contrary, I regard the availability of philosophy for this purpose as a manifestation of divine providence, allowing the church to make progress in clear and rigorous thinking about God that might otherwise have been impossible to achieve. But it is clear that great discernment was required in applying philosophical conceptions to the biblical God, and we need not assume that the church fathers made the correct decisions in every case.<sup>9</sup>

“Their philosophy was bad; ours is good,” is the essence of Hasker’s claim.

**Traditional hermeneutics and general revelation.** In response to the endorsement of the maxim “all truth is God’s truth,” several observations are

<sup>5</sup>John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998) 13.

<sup>6</sup>Clark H. Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God* 106. Note Pinnock’s later words: “There has to be discernment about which philosophical resources serve the proclamation and which hinder it. . . . If philosophy can play a role getting theology off track, it can also play a role in getting things back on track” (idem, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001] 23).

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>8</sup>William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God* 126.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 194.

necessary. First, open theists have yet to prove that the early fathers fell under that much influence from philosophical notions. Examine the ancient writings that the open theists cite, and you will find the fathers more interested in preserving apostolic doctrine than in integrating secular philosophy with it. Second, even if the open theists were right about the fathers, the battle would boil down to a contest between differing philosophical systems, a contest that in essence puts biblical revelation in the background. Neither side would base its ultimate position on Scripture.

Third and most basic of all, the assumption that "all truth is God's truth" is full of deceptive implications. I will not at this point repeat everything that I included in a discussion of "General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics" in a recent issue of *The Master's Seminary Journal*,<sup>10</sup> but will briefly point to four shortcomings of this widely cited, unbiblical foundation for biblical interpretation: (1) First, though all truth is God's truth, truth exists in varying degrees of certitude. We can never be absolutely sure about any conclusions derived from study of a secular discipline such as philosophy. (2) Though all truth is God's truth, all truth does not rest on the same authority. Truth resting upon God's revelation in the Bible certainly rests on a higher authority than alleged truth unearthed by human research. (3) Though all truth is God's truth, all truth does not fall on receptive ears. Truth from general revelation retains its truthful status only when received by nonexistent infallible humans. Sin has distorted man's ability to receive truth. Illumination of the Holy Spirit to overcome man's blindness is available only in connection with the understanding of Scripture. (4) "All truth is God's truth" derives from wrong assumptions about the range of general revelation. Information and discoveries originating in secular fields do not belong in the category of God's revealed truth. The scope of general revelation covers only a limited field of information about God.

One open theist, himself a philosopher, furnishes an illustration of the insufficiency of the "all truth is God's truth" maxim when speaking of a limited agreement among philosophers on the openness question. He acknowledges, "I do not mean to say that a universal consensus has emerged; that rarely if ever happens in philosophy."<sup>11</sup> If universal consensus is so evasive for philosophers, philosophers are not candid if they claim that they have discovered truth that merits enough consideration to be integrated into one's interpretation of the Bible.

Years ago Terry warned of the comparable danger of trying to integrate the findings of secular science with biblical interpretation:

Others have attempted various methods of 'reconciling' science and the Bible, and these have generally acted on the supposition that the results of scientific discovery necessitate a new interpretation of the Scripture records, or call for new principles of interpretation. The new discoveries, they say, do not conflict with the ancient revelation; they only

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<sup>10</sup>Robert L. Thomas, "General Revelation and Biblical Hermeneutics," *TMSJ* 9/1 (Spring 1998):4-23.

<sup>11</sup>Hasker, "Philosophical Perspective," in *The Openness of God* 126.

conflict with the old interpretation of the revelation. We must change our hermeneutical methods, and adapt them to the revelations of science. How for the thousandth time have we heard the story of Galileo and the Inquisition.<sup>12</sup>

Terry continues,

Hasty natures, however, indulging in pride of intellect, or given to following the dictum of honoured masters, may fall into grievous error in either of two ways: They may shut their eyes to facts, and hold to a delusion in spite of evidence; or they may become the obsequious victims of ‘science falsely so called.’ That certainly is a false science which is built upon inferences, assumptions, and theories, and yet presumes to dogmatize as if its hypotheses were facts. And that is a system of hermeneutics equally false and misleading which is so flexible, under the pressure of new discoveries as to yield to the putting of any number of new meanings upon an old and common word.<sup>13</sup>

In warning of a similar danger connected with secular psychology, J. Robertson McQuilkin, writing in 1977, used the following words:

My thesis is that in the next two decades the greatest threat to Biblical authority is the behavioral scientist who would in all good conscience man the barricades to defend the front door against any theologian who would attack the inspiration and authority of Scripture while all the while himself smuggling the content of Scripture out the back door through cultural or psychological interpretation.<sup>14</sup>

Both Terry and McQuilkin have proven to be accurate in their anticipations of the direction of evangelical hermeneutics. What Terry said about integrating science with the Bible and what McQuilkin said about integrating psychology with Scripture is equally true about the dangers of integrating philosophy with biblical hermeneutics.

## **(2) The Negative Impact of Preunderstanding on Biblical Hermeneutics**

**Open Theism and preunderstanding.** In 1980 Eerdmans released an earthshaking work by Anthony C. Thiselton: *Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description*. As the book’s title indicates, it

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<sup>12</sup>Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics: A Treatise on the Interpretation of the Old and New Testaments*, 2d ed. (Reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, n.d.) 533. Milton Spenser Terry (1840-1914) was a nineteenth-century Methodist Episcopalian. He was a graduate of Yale Divinity School and professor of Hebrew and Old Testament exegesis and theology at Garrett Biblical Institute. He was the author of *Biblical Apocalypics* and numerous commentaries on Old Testament books, but is most often remembered for his work on *Biblical Hermeneutics*, which was viewed by evangelicals as the standard work on biblical hermeneutics for most of the twentieth century.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 534.

<sup>14</sup>J. Robertson McQuilkin, “The Behavioral Sciences under the Authority of Scripture,” *JETS* 20 (1977):37).

recommended a philosophical approach to NT hermeneutical principles. Though not directly acknowledged, it advocated a major change in the way believers have understood divine revelation, at least since the Reformation and probably since the best days of the Garden of Eden. Thiselton advocated incorporating a new beginning point in the interpretation of Scripture, that of the preunderstanding of the interpreter. Prior to that, the interpreter sought for objectivity in interpretation, in letting the text speak for itself, without injecting personal bias. As innocent as this change may at first appear to be, it has utterly devastated evangelical hermeneutics for the last two decades. Subjectivism has become the rule rather than the exception, whereas prior to the focus on preunderstanding, the goal of exegetes was to learn what the text meant in its original setting.

I have elaborated on this hermeneutical shift in a 1996 article where I sought to show the dire consequences of such a change and the desirability of retaining traditional standards of objectivity.<sup>15</sup> I will not cover that ground again, but will simply show how the incorporation of preunderstanding into the interpretive process has been largely responsible for the emergence of Open Theism.

Pinnock evidenced the impact of preunderstanding on his work when he wrote, "In theology, as in science, we also make use of models. . . . In the case of the doctrine of God, we all have a basic portrait of God's identity in our minds when we search the Scriptures, and this model influences our exposition."<sup>16</sup> He continues,

Two models of God in particular are the most influential that people commonly carry around in their minds. We may think of God primarily as an aloof monarch, removed from the contingencies of the world, unchangeable in every aspect of being, as an all-determining and irresistible power, aware of everything that will ever happen and never taking risks. Or we may understand God as a caring parent with qualities of love and responsiveness, generosity and sensitivity, openness and vulnerability, a person (rather than a metaphysical principle) who experiences the world, responds to what happens, relates to us and interacts dynamically with humans. . . . God is sovereign in both models, but the mode of his sovereignty differs. . . . In this book we are advancing the second, or the open, view of God.<sup>17</sup>

To impose a "model," any "model," on the Bible in deriving a doctrine of God does not allow the Bible to speak for itself on the subject.<sup>18</sup> Traditional

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<sup>15</sup>Robert L. Thomas, "Current Hermeneutical Trends: Explanation or Obfuscation?," *JETS* 39 (1996):241-56.

<sup>16</sup>Pinnock, "Systematic Theology," in *The Openness of God* 103.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>A common practice is to exaggerate the model of the opposite position to make it less appealing to the general reader. Open theists utilize this technique in describing the position of traditional theism as illustrated in Pinnock's statements just given. In response to Open Theism's harsh-sounding model of God, MacArthur appropriately writes, "[T]he God of the old-model theology is also unceasingly gracious, merciful, and loving (a fact one would not be able to glean from the gross caricature new-model

hermeneutics advocates that exegetes and theologians approach Scripture with an open mind regarding the subject and let the doctrine emerge from applying grammatical-historical principles. Pinnock and the rest of the openness advocates evidence no inclination toward that practice. His own words are, “What we are really doing is conducting a competition between models of God.”<sup>19</sup> Anyone interested in a true picture of God is not interested in such a competition. He only wants to know the truth about God presented in the Bible.

Sanders’ approach to preunderstanding differs only in phraseology from that of Pinnock. He stated the options and his choice this way:

There are many different views of divine providence. For the purposes of this study, all of them may be placed under one of two basic models: the “no-risk” view and the “risk” view. . . . According to the risk model of providence, God has established certain boundaries within which creatures operate. But God sovereignly decides not to control each and every event, and some things go contrary to what God intends and may not turn out completely as God desires.<sup>20</sup>

Leading into the interpretive exercise, he assumes that God chose to gamble on granting mankind freedom by surrendering some undefined aspects of His sovereignty. He realized He might lose His bet—indeed, He has lost in many cases—but He chose to live with that risk. When one reads Scripture with this assumption in mind, clearly he will find instances when God took chances in which He had absolutely no control over the outcome. He was “open” to any result.

Rice displays the effects of preunderstanding on interpretation with the following words: “The Bible contains an enormous range of material, and on almost any significant topic we can find diverse statements if not diverse perspectives as well.”<sup>21</sup> He clarifies his meaning with an explanation:

This is why biblical scholars often object to expressions like “the biblical view of” or “according to the Bible.” They insist that there are biblical *views*, but no one biblical view. While it is *not* true, in spite of what some people claim, that you can make the Bible say anything you want it to say, different passages often seem to support different points of view. To cite a familiar example, many people do not see how the same God could command Israel on occasion to utterly destroy its foes (Josh 6:17; 1 Sam 15:2-3) and through Jesus instruct us to love our enemies (Mt 5:44).<sup>22</sup>

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advocates like to paint when they describe ‘old-model orthodoxy’)” (John MacArthur, “Open Theism’s Attack on the Atonement,” *TMSJ* 12/1 [Spring 2001]:4).

<sup>19</sup>Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God* 104.

<sup>20</sup>Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 110-11.

<sup>21</sup>Richard Rice, “Biblical Support for a New Perspective,” in *The Openness of God* 16.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 177 n. 7.

His explanation creates concern in one of two ways. Either the whole Bible is not inspired, or a single passage may have more than one meaning.<sup>23</sup> Plenary inspiration requires that one part of the Bible not contradict what is taught in another part. Since it is doubtful that Rice would deny plenary inspiration, his words amount to an indirect acknowledgment that preunderstanding will sway decisions regarding the meaning of an individual passage. Depending on interpretive assumptions, a single text may mean several different things caused by varying preunderstandings. Rice treats this as an outcome of legitimate hermeneutics. Yet that is certainly contrary to traditional interpretive practices.<sup>24</sup>

**Traditional hermeneutics and preunderstanding.** A major problem with current evangelical hermeneutics in general is its preunderstood assumption about what the text is going to yield. With that as the launching pad for interpretation, one can expect the emergence of many new doctrinal fads such as “Open Theism.” Terry proposed objectivity as a goal in a grammatical-historical approach to interpretation:

In the systematic presentation, therefore, of any scriptural doctrine, we are always to make a discriminating use of sound hermeneutical principles. We must not study them in the light of modern systems of divinity, but should aim rather to place ourselves in the position of the sacred writers, and study to obtain the impression their words would naturally have made upon the minds of the first readers. . . . Still less should we allow ourselves to be influenced by any presumptions of what the Scriptures ought to teach. . . . All such presumptions are uncalled for and prejudicial.<sup>25</sup>

The interpreter’s challenge is to bring nothing to the passage so that he can allow the passage to speak for itself.

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<sup>23</sup>Evangelicals in their newfound subjectivism in hermeneutics are closely approximating the interpretive technique of deconstructionism according to which each passage may have a number of correct interpretations. Rather than calling this by the postmodern name of deconstructionism, however, they will generally speak of “the hermeneutics of humility” whereby no person dares to claim he has the correct interpretation of a passage. Pinnock typifies the practices of allowing for multiple meanings in his defense of Open Theism: “Among other hermeneutical presuppositions, I accept diversity among biblical witnesses and recognize the dialogical character of the Bible. . . . [T]he Bible is a complex work by many authors whose views may vary and . . . the text is open to various plausible interpretations. . . . This means I cannot claim that the Bible teaches the open view of God or any other subject simply and straightforwardly such that there is no counter testimony which probes and questions and objects. For this and other reasons I look to the Holy Spirit in approaching the treasures of Scripture, praying that God’s breath will make it a living word and the source of fresh insight” (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 21). Later he adds, “[E]xegesis is not an exact science, owing to the historical situatedness of text and reader” (ibid., 60). Is Pinnock by these words endorsing reader-response hermeneutics?

<sup>24</sup>See Robert L. Thomas, “The Principle of Single Meaning,” *TMSJ* 12/1 (Spring 2001):33-34, 44.

<sup>25</sup>Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 595. Terry elaborates further on the need for the interpreter to avoid personal bias in his approach to the text in ibid., 152-54; 220.

### (3) The Fallacy of Adopting an Interpretive Center

**Open Theism and the interpretive center.** Rice explicitly exemplifies another major hermeneutical flaw of “Open Theism.” That is the error of designating “. . . a clear text, an interpretive center, a theological and hermeneutical key, a ‘*locus classicus*,’ a defining passage, a starting point that serves as a filter. . . .”<sup>26</sup> To interpret obscure passages in light of such “a clear text” may seem reasonable on the surface, but it robs other passages of their distinctive contributions to the broad revelation of Scripture.

In formulating a view of God, Rice designates one passage as the interpretive center for discovering from the Bible who God is:

From a Christian perspective, *love* is the first and last word in the biblical portrait of God. According to 1 John 4:8: “whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.” The statement *God is love* is as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of the divine reality.<sup>27</sup>

Rice calls 1 John 4:8 the most important description of God in the Bible, concluding that “God is love” succinctly summarizes a pervasive biblical theme. He devotes several pages to elaborating on the importance of this theme. He states, “Consequently, when we enumerate God’s qualities, we must not only include love; to be faithful to the Bible we must put love at the head of the list.”<sup>28</sup> Pressing his case ever further, he concludes, “A doctrine of God that is faithful to the Bible must show that all of God’s characteristics derive from love.”<sup>29</sup>

The rest of the openness people promote this same emphasis because they want to portray a God who is strongly relational, both within the persons of the Trinity and with the creatures He has created. Boyd has this eye-catching statement: “God is an eternal triune dance of love who eternally displays structure and freedom. His creation, which he invites to join his dance, manifests the same balance of structure and freedom.”<sup>30</sup> Boyd contrasts this freedom with what he calls “the now-debunked deterministic framework of the past,”<sup>31</sup> in other words, “the now-debunked teaching that God has a detailed plan for the future of both individuals and society.” God interacts with His creatures, allowing them freedom to choose and remaining unaware of the choices they will make until they make them. That is the demonstration of His love.

Sanders adds a different wording in support of the primacy of God’s love:

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<sup>26</sup>Paul W. Felix, Sr., “The Hermeneutics of Evangelical Feminism,” *TMSJ* 5/2 (Fall 1994):166-67.

<sup>27</sup>Rice, “Biblical Support,” in *The Openness of God* 18.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup>Boyd, *God of the Possible* 111.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*

“The God of Greek thought is anonymous, self-sufficient, alone (unrelated), invulnerable, self-thinking thought, changeless and egocentric. The triune God of the Bible is ‘named’ (as Yahweh to Israel and then as Father, Son and Spirit through Jesus), is God for others, makes himself vulnerable and is self-giving love.”<sup>32</sup> Pinnock joins the case for making love God’s overriding quality when he states, “[L]ove rather than almighty power is the primary perfection of God.”<sup>33</sup>

**Traditional hermeneutics and the interpretive center.** Terry points out the fallacy of having an interpretive center: “But we must avoid the danger of overstepping in this matter [i.e., in the use of parallel passages to interpret one another].”<sup>34</sup> He particularly warns about using the writings of one biblical author to throw light on the meaning of a passage by another author. That error is precisely the one committed by open theists in their interpretation of all Scripture in the light of 1 John 4:8. Their approach reads the meaning of 1 John—if indeed they have interpreted 1 John correctly—into the rest of the Bible and deprives sections dealing with God’s other attributes of their biblical role in constructing the doctrine of God.

Without question the Bible says plenty about the love of God. Depictions of Him should always include this marvelous attribute. Yet the Bible also says God is holy (Lev 19:2; 1 Pet 1:16). It also says that God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). To exclude any one of these or the many other attributes of God spoken of in Scripture is to give an unbalanced view of His person. The doctrine of God should grow out of the *whole* counsel of God, not just selected parts. To interpret Lev 19:2 or Heb 12:29 through the eyes of 1 John 4:8 does severe injustice not only to the contexts of Lev 19:2 and Heb 12:29, but also to the context of 1 John 4:8, which nowhere sets forth the idea of an overriding theological concept.

To formulate the doctrine by giving preeminence to 1 John 4:8 is a classic example of using a *locus classicus* to interpret the rest of Scripture. Evangelical feminist hermeneutics have illustrated this malpractice by using Gal 3:28 as an interpretive filter in analyses of 1 Cor 11:2-16; 14:33-35; 1 Tim 2:11-15; Eph 5:22-33; 1 Pet 3:1-7. Such a practice results in wrong understandings of what the other passages are stating as well as a reading into Gal 3:28 of something that is not there. The choice of a hermeneutical key on any biblical subject will inevitably reflect the preunderstanding of the interpreter, not the objective teaching of Scripture. To use such a key is also inconsistent with the evangelical doctrine of plenary inspiration. Including all texts on a given subject allows each text to have its distinctive input and avoids interpretations that are slanted by human bias.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in *The Openness of God* 100.

<sup>33</sup>Pinnock, “Systematic Theology,” in *The Openness of God* 114.

<sup>34</sup>Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 222.

<sup>35</sup>See Felix, “Hermeneutics of Evangelical Feminism,” *TMSJ* 165-68, for further elaboration on the need to avoid reading other Scripture through the eyes of a single passage.

Other characteristics of God deserve equal places alongside love in describing who God is. Adam sinned in the Garden as Gen 3:6-7 records, but God in His omniscience knew beforehand that he would. Otherwise, the Lamb would not have been foreknown and selected to die before the foundation of the world (1 Pet 1:20). God in His omnipotence had a plan for the world even before it was created. Nothing is impossible for Him any more than planning that His Son would be born of a virgin and then implementing that plan (Luke 1:37). God is an eternal being. Otherwise, one day could not be for Him as a thousand years and a thousand years as one day (2 Pet 3:8). He is omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent as Psalm 139 so beautifully recognizes (139:1-16). To allow any of these other qualities to overshadow God’s love would be equally misleading as is the converse.

#### **(4) The Fickleness of “Hermeneutical Hopscotch”**

**Open Theism and discourse analysis.** The case for openness rests on a running survey of biblical passages. This hermeneutical procedure is a recent development that usually goes by the name of discourse analysis. It is the product of modern developments in the field of linguistics. “Generally speaking, discourse analysis is the attempt to study the organization of language above the sentence level. It is the study of larger linguistic units such as entire conversations or written texts.”<sup>36</sup> It charts the flow of the argument of a passage. “As such, discourse analysis is a type of translation pointing to the gist of the argument developed in the text.”<sup>37</sup> This technique seeks a larger picture in a passage *before* investigating the details. In fact, it disparages traditional methods that investigate the details first, before proceeding to the larger picture. In implementing this wholistic approach, the method takes into consideration sociological, psychological, communicative, and other elements that may have influenced an author to produce what he did.

This hermeneutical innovation has given rise to a practice that I have elsewhere termed “hermeneutical hopscotch,” the practice of hopping from one carefully selected part of a larger section to another. By selecting only parts that contribute to supporting a predetermined opinion, the “hopscotch” approach can demonstrate just about anything the interpreter desires to prove.

That is essentially the method of Open Theism in its use of Scripture. For example, Boyd begins with Gen 6:6, and says, “The LORD *was sorry* that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” He then uses this to prove that God did not know in advance that humans would come to this wicked state.<sup>38</sup> Then he does the same thing with 1 Sam 15:10, 35, drawing the same conclusion about God’s ignorance of the future. He cites Num 14:11 and Hos 8:5 where God asks questions about the future. Most have interpreted these as rhetorical

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<sup>36</sup>David Alan Black, “Introduction,” in *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Discourse Analysis* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1992) 12.

<sup>37</sup>J. P. Louw, “Reading a Text As Discourse,” in *Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation* 15.

<sup>38</sup>Boyd, *God of the Possible* 55.

questions, but Boyd, after acknowledging rhetorical questions as a possibility, concludes that the questions must reflect God's lack of knowledge about the duration of Israel's stubbornness.<sup>39</sup> He continues to string together such passages, picking only the instances that support his case. He strains one of these particularly when discussing "*The 'Day and Hour' of the Coming.*" Citing Mark 13:32—Jesus' statement, "about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father"—Boyd interprets it through the eyes of 2 Pet 3:9-12 where Peter speaks of "hastening the day" of that coming by proper behavior.<sup>40</sup> On the basis of Peter's words and in contradiction of Jesus's words, Boyd reasons that the Father could not know precisely the day or hour because that date has not yet been set. The "when" of the coming depends on human freedom of choice. Here is a classic example of eisegesis in both Mark 13:32 and 2 Pet 3:9-12. The time of the coming has been set according to Acts 1:7, and the Father does know when it will happen. We as humans do not know when, so as Peter instructs, we behave ourselves in a way to expedite that happening through godly living. It is altogether unnatural to interpret Mark 13:32 the way Boyd does, in the light of both the verse's statement itself and the larger context of the Olivet Discourse.

Sanders proceeds in much the same way as Boyd, picking only those points that suit his purpose, first with Genesis 1 and then with Genesis 2–3.<sup>41</sup> He then picks up with Genesis 6 as did Boyd, but in much more detail.<sup>42</sup> Then he goes to the story of Abraham, moving from Gen 12:1-3 to 15:1 to 15:2-3 to 15:9-21 to 15:13-16 to 16:11 to 18:4 to 22:1 to 22:12 to 22:15-18.<sup>43</sup> He stays with each passage only long enough to milk it for the argument he needs to prove his preconceived point. He does the same with the Joseph narrative.<sup>44</sup> Along the way he is careful to explain away Gen 18:14—"Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" (God's unqualified omnipotence)—and Gen 50:20—"And as for you, you meant evil against me, *but* God meant it for good in order to bring about this present result, to preserve many people alive" (God's absolute sovereignty).<sup>45</sup>

**Traditional hermeneutics and discourse analysis.** That kind of selective interpretation hardly deserves the name of exegesis. For example, an interpreter, if he set out to do so, could use a discourse analysis of Genesis to prove Abraham was a very wicked man.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 58-59.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>41</sup>Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 41-49.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 50-53.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 51-52, 55.

Gen 12:11-13: 11 And it came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; 12 and it will come about when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. 13 “Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.” [Abraham encouraged his wife to lie to save his own neck.]

Gen 12:18-19: 18 Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? 19 “Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go.” [Abraham himself was a liar.]

Gen 16:3-6: 3 And after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram’s wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. 4 And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. 5 And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms; but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me.” 6 But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight.” So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence. [Abraham was an adulterer, and was unwilling to accept the responsibility of caring for the woman involved with him in the adulterous act.]

Gen 17:15-17: 15 Then God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah *shall be* her name. 16 “And I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be *a mother of nations*; kings of peoples shall come from her.” 17 Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, “Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear *a child*?” [Abraham laughed at the promise of God as though it were ridiculous.]

Gen 20:1-2: 1 Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. 2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. [Abraham a second time lied about Sarah being his sister.]

Gen 20:12: 12 “Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. [Abraham rationalized to try to justify the lie he had told.]

Gen 21:14-15: 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave *them* to Hagar, putting *them* on her shoulder, and gave *her* the boy, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. 15 And the water in the skin was used up, and she left the boy under one of the bushes. [Abraham refused to accept the responsibility for his child born out of wedlock and for the mother who had borne him.]

Gen 22:10: 10 And Abraham stretched out his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.

[Abraham was willing to murder his own son.]

Gen 24:2-4: 2 And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he owned, "Please place your hand under my thigh, 3 and I will make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you shall not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I live, 4 but you shall go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac." [Abraham insisted on picking a wife for Isaac his son.]

In contrast to this negative picture, more comprehensive sections within this broad scope of Scripture teach that Abraham lived an exemplary life of faith in spite of his lapses, notwithstanding the "hopscootch" approach that might lead to the opposite conclusion.

Traditional hermeneutical authorities have strong words about the importance of context: "Many a passage of Scripture will not be understood at all without the help afforded by the context; for many a sentence derives all its point and force from the connexion in which it stands."<sup>46</sup> Terry continues his emphasis on context with the following words:

Some religious teachers are fond of employing scriptural texts simply as mottoes, with little or no regard to their true connexion. Thus they too often adapt them to their use by imparting to them a factitious sense foreign to their proper scope and meaning. The seeming gain in all such cases is more than counterbalanced by the loss and danger that attend the practice. It encourages the habit of interpreting Scripture in an arbitrary and fanciful way, and thus furnishes the teachers of error with their most effective weapon. The practice cannot be defended on any plea of necessity.<sup>47</sup>

Most of the biblical case for openness come from narrative-type passages<sup>48</sup> and the OT prophets, which are not the ideal types of literature for deriving doctrinal conclusions. For learning who God is, passages that have as their objective to teach that doctrine are much more satisfactory, as subsequent discussion will illustrate.

### **The Foundational Nature of Hermeneutics**

Rules of interpretation lie at the root of any theological conclusions based on the Bible. "Open Theism" furnishes a testimonial to this fact. By deviating from traditional grammatical-historical principles, the variety of conclusions one can reach has no limit.

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<sup>46</sup>Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* 219.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 219-20 n. 1.

<sup>48</sup>Typical of openness reliance on narrative passages for explaining God's sovereignty is Pinnock's statement, "The biblical *narrative* reveals the nature of God's sovereignty" (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 45 [emphasis added]). The nature of God's sovereignty needs to be explained in light of texts whose purpose is to teach that doctrine—passages such as Romans 9—not on the basis of narrative passages that lend themselves to a number of possible explanations.

On our way home from a lengthy freeway trip recently, my 13-year-old granddaughter was getting impatient with the length of the trip. She kept asking, “How much longer? How much longer?” When we reached a point that I knew was about twenty minutes from home, I thought it would be a good idea to turn her impatience into a game. So I told her that we would arrive at home at 7:08 p.m. She took the game over from there. She entered her prediction of 7:05 p.m., and then to safeguard her position she added a second prediction of 7:09 p.m. She became the self-proclaimed authority on the rules by which we would play game. I could not get her to explain why she was allowed two predictions to my one. She said we were going to follow the rules of the TV game “The Price is Right,” whatever those are. She then added several other stipulations that made it next to impossible for me to win the game. I suffered a bitter defeat playing according to her rules, and she came away triumphantly.

The new set of rules for interpreting the Bible that some evangelicals have adopted enables them to prove just about anything they want to prove. A recent illustration of this is the increasingly popular “open view of God,” the teaching that the future is not closed off by a settled divine foreknowledge, that it is left open for possible happenings that have not yet occurred to either God or man. Reportedly, the advocates of this view support it with “clear and responsible biblical interpretation.”<sup>49</sup> It is “clear and responsible” when playing by the rules open theists have invented, but not according to traditionally accepted principles.

### The Sovereignty of God

Discussions of Open Theism could go any number of directions. They could respond one passage at a time to the system’s alleged supporting texts, which is what Bruce Ware does to some extent,<sup>50</sup> or they could deal with differing definitions for each of the attributes of God—His omnipotence, omniscience, omnipresence, impassibility, transcendence, eternality, immutability, and so on. Open Theism defines all of these differently from traditional orthodoxy. For the purposes of this study, however, divine sovereignty will be the focus, because all the other attributes derive from this attribute in one way or another.

### Open Theism’s Explanation

Sanders agrees with the foundational nature of this attribute of sovereignty when he says, “I argue that the key element in the debate over providence is not the type of omniscience God has but the kind of sovereignty God has decided to

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<sup>49</sup>Walter Brueggemann’s endorsement of Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible*, No. 5 of *The Discerning Reader* from Baker Book House.

<sup>50</sup>Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000) 65-98.

exercise.”<sup>51</sup> Open theists speak of the sovereignty of God, but they also say that God surrendered a degree of that sovereignty when He created mankind.

Sanders leads into such a thought when he writes, “God is the sovereign Creator, for there is no opposition to his act of creating. We must be careful in basing a doctrine of providence on this aspect of creation, since it is an open question . . . whether God can and will sovereignly create beings over which he does not exercise total control.”<sup>52</sup> Sanders later decides that God has given away some of His sovereignty: “God sovereignly decides that not everything will be up to God. Some important things are left in the hands of humanity as God’s cocreators such that we are to collaborate with God in the achievement of the divine project. . . . There is freedom for humans to be creative within the ‘rules of the game’ God has established.”<sup>53</sup>

Rice expresses God’s partial sovereignty as follows: “At times, God acts to bring things about unilaterally, as it were. . . . At other times, however, God interacts with creaturely agents in pursuing his goals.”<sup>54</sup> “The fact that God foreknows or predestines something does not guarantee that it will happen, the fact that God determines part of history does not mean that he determines all of history. . . . Consequently, the actual course of history is not something God alone decides all by himself. God and the creatures both contribute.”<sup>55</sup>

Boyd speaks of God’s sovereignty in much the same way: “To confess that God can control whatever he wants to control leaves open the question of *how much* God actually does want to control.”<sup>56</sup> Later he adds,

Thus far we have examined the motif of Scripture that celebrates God’s sovereignty over creation and lordship over history. God predestines and foreknows as settled whatever he sees fit to predestine and foreknow as settled. We have also seen, however, that this motif of future determinism does not warrant the conclusion that God predestines and foreknows as settled *everything* about the future.<sup>57</sup>

He clarifies his view further: “The open view concludes that the future is literally settled to whatever degree God wants to settle it, and literally open to the extent that God desires to leave it open to be resolved by the decisions of his creations.”<sup>58</sup>

By implication, these and other open theists put God into the same category

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 12.

<sup>52</sup>Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 41.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 44.

<sup>54</sup>Rice, “Biblical Support,” in *The Openness of God* 37.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 55-56.

<sup>56</sup>Boyd, *God of the Possible* 51.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 53.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 54.

as Adam in some respects. God created Adam as sovereign over all creation (Gen 1:28), but Adam chose to surrender his sovereignty when he yielded his role to the serpent and Satan (Gen 3:6-7). The psalmist elaborates on the purposed sovereignty of mankind in Ps 8:4-6. The writer of Hebrews, however, elaborates on the loss of man’s sovereignty and how man through Jesus will regain it in the future during the age to come (Heb 2:5-9).

The open theist would have people believe that a similar thing has occurred with God. By choice God surrendered a degree of His sovereignty over His creation and will someday regain it at the second coming of Christ. The principal difference is that Adam surrendered his sovereignty in toto, but God surrendered only a part of His sovereignty. The obvious question is, however, Is there any such thing as partial sovereignty? If one surrenders even a fraction of his sovereignty, does sovereignty still exist? Webster defines “sovereign” as “supreme in power, rank, or authority.”<sup>59</sup> Someone who has surrendered even a fraction of that power, rank, or authority is no longer a sovereign. It is one thing for a sovereign to delegate responsibility, but it is another for him to surrender his authority as open theists say God has done. In that case God no longer exercises control over all that happens with the result that creatures are operating independently of Him, without having to answer to Him for their actions. That is perhaps why significant advocates of Open Theism oppose the doctrine of eternal punishment.<sup>60</sup> God granted human freedom and so will not punish anyone who uses it wrongly, they say.

When open theists speak of sovereignty, they do not mean “supreme in power, rank, and authority” any more than they mean that God knows all when they speak of His omniscience. Nor do they mean that God is everywhere present when they speak of His omnipresence or that He is all-powerful when they speak of His omnipotence. They do not mean that He existed before time sequence became a reality when they speak of His eternity. They have retained traditional terminology, but have attached their own definitions to these words because of the contradictory nature of their system in saying all these attributes are only partial.

## The Biblical Explanation

**Examples of mishandling the text.** Many texts teach specifically the absolute sovereignty<sup>61</sup> of God. Open Theism has ways to explain away many of

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<sup>59</sup>Michael Agnes, *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Foster City, Calif.: IDG Books Worldwide, 2000) 1372.

<sup>60</sup>For more information on those who oppose the doctrine of eternal punishment, see *TMSJ* 9/2 (Fall 1998), an issue devoted to critiquing that doctrine from a biblical standpoint.

<sup>61</sup>“Absolute sovereignty” is a redundancy, because sovereignty rightly understood is always absolute. It is the same as using “very unique” to describe a phenomenon, because if something is unique, only one degree of uniqueness exists. Yet because of the relativizing of sovereignty in Open Theism’s system, for clarity’s sake “absolute sovereignty” will sometimes appear in this discussion. Pinnock refers to limited sovereignty as “‘meticulous’ sovereignty” and to absolute sovereignty as “‘general’ sovereignty” (Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover* 53). That is veiled terminology to obscure the impossibility

these texts. One proponent assigns Jesus' statement, "All authority has been given to Me" (Matt 28:18), to the time of the end, and notes that in the meantime, "The way of God in Jesus will not be achieved through overwhelming power or invulnerability."<sup>62</sup> Stated in other terms, he says the sovereignty of God is not currently operative. Yet, Matt 28:18 specifically states that all authority had already been granted to Christ at the time He uttered those words, just before His ascension. To postpone the operation of that authority till His second coming not only reads something into the statement that is not there, but also violates the context of Matthew 28 by removing the motivation for fulfillment of the Great Commission.

Another "open" proponent assigns God's election of Christians before the foundation of the world in Eph 1:4 to the realm of corporate election. He interprets Paul to mean that God made this choice of everyone who would be in Christ, without knowing their identity individually. He writes,

Note, Paul does *not* say that we were *individually* predestined to be "in Christ" (or not). Scripture elsewhere tells us that if it were up to God alone, he would save everyone (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9). But it is not up to God alone; God gave humans free will. What Paul says in this verse is that *whoever chooses* to be "in Christ" is predestined to be "holy and blameless before him in love."<sup>63</sup>

The open view advocates that choosing individuals is one of the areas where God in His limited sovereignty has refrained, according to this reading of Eph 1:4.

Yet the verse does not say God has chosen a group; it says He has chosen individuals. Lying in a context of Eph 1:3-14 where the heavy emphasis is on the primacy of God's role in salvation, the verse leaves no room for human activity.<sup>64</sup> It could hardly refer to the corporate election of whoever may come to be in Christ. Crawford has written,

Though it is true that Christ is God's Elect One (Isa 42:1, 6 f.; cf. Matt 12:18) and that apart from His election there could be no realization of the election of unbelievers, His election is of a different nature. Christ was elected to be the redeemer in contrast to sinners being elected for redemption. Thus Christ's election does not truly parallel that of Christians, and so theirs cannot be contained in His.<sup>65</sup>

Therefore, from a biblical standpoint Open Theism strikes out again.

Yet the passage that appears to give the open theists the biggest problem

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of such a thing as limited sovereignty.

<sup>62</sup>Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 94.

<sup>63</sup>Boyd, *God of the Possible* 46-47.

<sup>64</sup>Leslie James Crawford, "Ephesians 1:3-4 and the Nature of Election," *TMSJ* 11/1 (Spring 2000):76-78.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

is Romans 9–11, particularly Romans 9. In commenting on the potter metaphor in Romans 9, Sanders observes, “Paul is not arguing for divine pancausality here. This misunderstanding occurs when Romans 9 is divorced from its historical setting and universalized into timeless truth. Paul is not arguing about abstract principles of providence but about a specific historical situation between God and Israel.”<sup>66</sup> This comes in the midst of Sanders’ lengthy discussion of the extended passage. In summing up the section, he remarks, “God has achieved some of what he desired, but not everything. . . . In his providential work God encounters conflict and opposition to his project, and in seeking its fulfillment he experiences both victory and defeat.”<sup>67</sup>

Boyd deals with Romans 9 in his “question and objection” chapter of *God of the Possible*.<sup>68</sup> He devotes more space to this question and objection than to any of the other eighteen that he includes. He attempts to make six points in explaining the passage from the open viewpoint. (1) Arminianism does not understand Romans 9 to teach God’s sovereignty. That, of course, is a theological argument and proves nothing about the meaning of the passage. (2) The view that God determines who will and will not receive mercy contradicts the teaching of Scripture that God’s love is universal and impartial and that He desires everyone to be saved (Acts 10:34; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9).<sup>69</sup> Here is another hermeneutical flaw. Each passage must stand on its own and make its own distinctive contribution. (3) Paul’s summary in Rom 9:30–32 reveals the meaning of the passage: the verses appeal “to morally responsible choices of the Israelites and Gentiles.”<sup>70</sup> Yet Paul’s statement in 9:30 excludes a moral choice. For the Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness to attain the same must be a sovereign choice of God, not a human moral choice.

(4) The OT source of the potter metaphor of Romans 9 is Jeremiah 18. In Jeremiah the metaphor does not prove sovereignty, because the “clay” in the potter’s hands is not passive. The potter’s action depends on what the clay does.<sup>71</sup> This, however, is a questionable interpretation of Jeremiah 18 and is conspicuously a wrong interpretation of Romans 9 as subsequent discussion will show. Besides, Paul as a NT writer is not bound in his use of the OT to abide by the grammatical-historical meaning of the Jeremiah passage. (5) Boyd continues,

When Paul responds to the charge of injustice by asking, ‘who . . . are you, a human being, to argue with God?’ (v. 20), he is not thereby appealing to the sheer power of the potter over the clay. He is rather appealing to the rights and wisdom of the potter to

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<sup>66</sup>Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 122.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 123–24.

<sup>68</sup>Boyd, *God of the Possible* 139–44.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 141.

fashion clay according to his providential purposes (“as it seem[s] good to him” [Jer. 18:4]), and in a manner that is appropriate, given the kind of clay he has to work with.<sup>72</sup>

Unfortunately, this is a classic case of eisegesis in Boyd’s approach. Romans 9 says absolutely nothing about the quality of the clay the potter works with. (6) The point of the passage is not who will and will not be saved, but whether or not God’s covenantal promises have failed.<sup>73</sup> Boyd concludes that faith makes one a true Israelite and that a Gentile can belong to God’s covenant by faith. God’s covenant, originally with ethnic Israel, is now fulfilled with those outside Israel, is presumably Boyd’s meaning. If his reasoning is correct, however, God’s covenant promises have failed. This is contrary to Romans 9–11, however, which demonstrates that God’s covenant promises to *ethnic* Israel will not fail, but will eventually be fulfilled.

**An example of the true meaning.** If the openness people and Arminians have missed the point of Romans 9, what does the chapter teach? Romans 1–8 presents universal truths regarding condemnation, justification, sanctification, and glorification, and ends with a hymn of victory that, because of the promises of God, nothing can separate believers from the love of Christ (8:38-39). Certain historical developments, however, raise a question about the reliability of God’s promises. Those developments connect with the rejection of Israel by God and the promises of God made to Israel. If He has rejected Israel and does not fulfil His promises to Israel, how can other recipients of His promises, those benefitting through the work of Christ, expect Him to fulfil His promises to them?<sup>74</sup> To that question Paul responds in His famous theodicy in Romans 9–11, his defense of God’s dealings with mankind.

*Israel’s rejection a cause of great sorrow to Paul (9:1-5).* The first section of Romans 9 (vv. 1-5) shows the impact of Israel’s rejection on Paul. He declares his love and personal sorrow over the plight of his fellow Israelites, and in so doing, recalls their distinctive and permanent role as recipients of the law and the natural stock that produced the Messiah.

*First objection and response: God’s promises to Israel have not failed (9:6-*

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 142-43.

<sup>74</sup>John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 18-19; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979) 2:446-47; E. H. Gifford, “Romans,” in *The Holy Bible with an Explanatory and Critical Commentary, New Testament*, ed. F. C. Cook (London: John Murray, 1900) 3:167; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, ed. Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 550-51; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 343-44.

13). Next Paul responds to the first of three objections he imagines a Jewish opponent might raise, an objection that the promise of God to Israel has failed. He elaborates on the connection between Israel’s rejection and the promises of God made to the nation (9:6-13). The promise of God to Israel has not failed, because the promise did not belong to every single individual among the natural descendants of Abraham.<sup>75</sup> It belonged only to chosen members of that race. God in His sovereignty chose Isaac, the son of promise, rather than Ishmael, the son of the flesh. He made clear that His choice was apart from any human consideration by choosing Jacob over Esau, doing so before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad. God’s sovereignty in this matter was absolute. Already in Israel’s history, before her rejection by God at the Messiah’s first advent, God had demonstrated His sovereignty by twice narrowing the line of Abraham’s descendants to smaller groups. His actions had nothing to do with human responses. His sovereign rejection of portions of the nation in former days does not invalidate His promises. It simply narrowed their fulfillment to smaller segments of Abraham’s descendants. The same applies to His most recent rejection of a portion of the nation.

*Second objection and response: God is not unjust in hardening Israel this way (9:14-18).* In response to a second implied objection that God is unjust for hardening Israel this way, Paul points out that God’s rejection of Israel is perfectly consistent with God’s nature and character (9:14-18). The imaginary objector holds that for God’s absolute election to be independent of any human merit, as Paul has just stated in 9:11, is not fair. A Jewish objector would heartily approve of the rejection of Ishmael and Esau, but when their rejection illustrates a principle that would exclude the nation as a whole from the promises made to Abraham, such would provoke the objection that God is unjust. Paul responds that God is not unjust in hardening the nation that way.

He cannot be unjust because He is sovereign.<sup>76</sup> According to Moses, He will have mercy on whom He chooses because His decisions are independent of human merit (9:15). That leads to the conclusion that the reason for God’s choice is not a human response or a human exertion, but the reason lies in the person who shows mercy—i.e., God (9:17). Because God is sovereign, for Him to make independent choices cannot be injustice.

For further proof of God’s sovereignty from Scripture, Paul turns to Moses’ enemy, Pharaoh (9:17). In Pharaoh he finds an example of God’s dealings with the other class of mankind. God raised Pharaoh to prominence to furnish an example of His power and to make known His name and sovereignty throughout the world.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>75</sup>Piper, *Justification of God* 50; Gifford, “Romans” 169; Morris, *Romans* 351-52.

<sup>76</sup>Piper, *Justification of God* 179; Morris, *Romans* 358; Moo, *Romans* 589-91.

<sup>77</sup>Moo, *Romans* 595. Sanders ignores the plain statement of Rom 9:17 when he writes, “God strengthened Pharaoh’s heart in his rebellion in the hopes that it would help him come to his senses and repent” (*The God Who Risks* 121). God *hardened*, not *strengthened*, Pharaoh’s heart to show His power

Consideration of the examples of Moses and Pharaoh leads inevitably to the conclusion that choosing the objects of His mercy and hardening the rest are choices that are His and His alone, independent of any interaction with humans (9:18).

*Third objection and response: God is the one who hardens, yet He can still put the blame on man because He is the Creator (9:19-29).* Paul sees himself faced with a possible third objection: “If God Himself hardens the heart, why does He find fault with man? What justice is there in continuing to blame a creature when God so wills and no one can resist Him?” (9:19). To this objection the apostle responds by rebuking the presumption of mere man in replying to God this way; the thing made dare not ask the maker, why have you made me this way? (9:20).<sup>78</sup> The potter has power over the clay to make honorable vessels and dishonorable vessels (9:21).<sup>79</sup> The absolute power of the creator over His creatures is the general point, but the specific point is God’s absolute power over Israel to do with her as He pleases. Paul derives his potter metaphor from the same figure in the OT where God’s control over Israel is in view (cf. Isa 29:16; 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:6).

Though the creator’s prerogative is to show His power by inflicting immediate wrath on vessels of wrath, in actuality He has put up with those vessels for a while because of His great longsuffering (9:22). Since the creator has opted to delay the imposition of His wrath even though the vessels are fitted for destruction, how can anyone raise a further objection against His justice? To dampen further objections to God’s justice, Paul notes the way God has demonstrated the riches of His glory on vessels of mercy whom He prepared before for glory (9:23) and identifies those vessels as coming from among not just the Jews, but also from among the Gentiles (9:24). People from among both groups were among those receiving God’s sovereign call to benefit from His mercy.

To justify God’s inclusion of Gentiles along with Jews, Paul quotes Hos 2:23 and 1:10 to recall the principle that God can take into His place of privilege those who had been previously cut off from it (9:25-26). He then cites Isa 10:22-23 and 1:9 to support the calling of Jews, passages that emphasize the calling of only a remnant of Israel, however (9:27-29). The inevitable conclusion is the bulk of Israel are vessels of wrath.

Note the repeated emphasis on God’s sovereignty. In 9:11: “For though *the twins* were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to *His* choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls.” In 9:15: “For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’” In 9:16: “So then

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in Pharaoh and that God’s name might be proclaimed in all the land according to that Scripture.

<sup>78</sup>Piper, *Justification of God* 186; Cranfield, *Romans* 490-91; Morris, *Romans* 364-65.

<sup>79</sup>The potter illustration has nothing to do with resistance put up by the clay, as Sanders and Boyd contend (Sanders, *The God Who Risks* 122; Boyd, *God of the Possible* 141). The text never alludes to the quality of the clay. Its whole attention focuses on the sovereign will of the potter (Rom 9:21).

it *does not depend* on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy.” In 9:18: “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.” In 9:21: “Does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use?” In 9:23-24: God desired “that He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, *even* us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.” Only an intentionally blind person can fail to see God’s absolute sovereignty in hardening Israel as Paul defends God’s unique role in Rom 9:1-29.

*How the hardening works from a human perspective (9:30–10:21).* In 9:30–10:21 Paul turns to view how the hardening works itself out from the human perspective.<sup>80</sup> Notably, the inclusion of some Gentiles who did not seek righteousness has accompanied the exclusion of Israel (9:30; cf. 9:24-26; 10:19-20). That is a sovereign act of God even though it resulted in moral choices by human beings, the choices to believe and not to believe. Human responsibility to choose accompanies divine sovereignty.

*God’s rejection of Israel is not complete (11:1-10).* As Paul resumes God’s dealings with Israel in Romans 11:1-10, he points out that God’s rejection of the nation is not complete. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew (11:1-2a). As in the days of Elijah, He has picked a remnant according to the election of grace (11:2b-6). The remnant has obtained what Israel sought, but the rest were hardened (11:7-10). The promise of God is still in effect in His inclusion of a remnant of ethnic Israel in the church.<sup>81</sup> The full sovereignty of God is still operative even though the vast majority of Israel are hardened.

*God’s rejection of Israel is not final (11:11-32).* Paul continues to detail God’s dealings with the nation in demonstrating that His rejection of Israel is not final (11:11-32).<sup>82</sup> In His sovereign purposes their stumbling was for the purpose of bringing salvation to the Gentiles, which in turn had its goal of provoking Israel to jealousy. God broke off the natural branches of the olive tree (11:21) and He is able to graft them in again (11:23), illustrating the severity and kindness of God (11:22). In God’s sovereign plan, partial hardness has come to Israel until a full number of the Gentiles has come into the body of Christ (11:24). Then all Israel will be saved (11:25).

God’s promises to Israel have not failed. In His sovereign dealings He has set the nation aside for a time for the purpose of including Gentiles as objects of His

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<sup>80</sup>Moo, *Romans* 617.

<sup>81</sup>Piper, *Justification of God* 184; Moo, *Romans* 671-72.

<sup>82</sup>Gifford, “Romans” 198-200; Cranfield, *Romans* 572-77; Harold W. Hoehner, “Israel in Romans 9–11,” in *Israel: The Land and the People*, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 154-57.

mercy (11:28-32). Eventually all Israel will be saved.

*Doxology because of God's unsearchable judgments and unfathomable ways (11:33-36).* It is no wonder that Paul closes these three chapters with a doxology celebrating God's unsearchable judgments and unfathomable ways (11:33-36). What a marvelous plan!

Yes, late in chapter 9, in chapter 10, and occasionally in chapter 11 the apostle injects words about the part played by human moral choices, including belief and unbelief, but these are instances of viewing God's sovereign activity from a human perspective. Finite men see only their own responsibility to make right moral choices and the penalties involved for failing to do so. That is a perfectly accurate human perception. But from the divine perspective God is at work in individual lives, enabling some people to choose right or withholding that enablement from others. He can do that because He controls all that happens.

### **The Impossible Dilemma of Open Theism**

Openness advocates cannot live with this tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Their solution to relieve the tension is to have God surrender enough of His sovereignty and free mankind from His control in their lives. That is an unbiblical solution. Saucy has touched on the biblical solution when writing about Christ's offer of the kingdom at His first coming:

We suggest that the solution lies in the same realm as other problems related to the sovereign decree of God for history and the responsible actions of mankind. The idea that God could offer humankind a real choice and opportunity, knowing all the while that humankind would fail (and, in fact, having decreed a plan on the basis of that failure), is expressed in other passages of Scripture. In Eden, humankind was given a genuine opportunity to choose holiness, yet Scripture indicates that God's plan already included the sacrifice of Christ 'from the creation of the world' (Rev 13:8; cf. Ac 2:23; 4:28). Thus in this instance, a similar unanswerable question as that related to the offer of the kingdom might be posed: "What would have happened to the death of Christ if Adam and Eve had not sinned?"<sup>83</sup>

The Scripture furnishes numerous instances where God's sovereignty and man's free will interplay with each other. Both are biblical teachings. For man to try to alter either one to find a reconciliation is an attempt to eat of the fruit of the forbidden tree, an attempt of man to escape his finitude so as to become like an infinite God. Open Theism attempts to alter biblical teaching about God's sovereignty, and in so doing, make God like man, thus creating the likeness that Adam and Eve sought in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:5). Such attempts will never succeed. Valid principles

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<sup>83</sup>Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 92.

of hermeneutics for understanding what God has said in His Word will not permit it.

The best we as humans can do is to accept the Bible’s teaching about both the absolute sovereignty of God and freedom of men to make their own moral decisions whether to believe in Christ or not, without changing either teaching. From the standpoint of human logic and philosophical reasoning, the two teachings are in conflict, but from a biblical standpoint they are not.