

SALVATION AND SOVEREIGNTY: A REVIEW ESSAY

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Ken Keathley's *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* addresses an amalgam of important issues usually discussed in connection with theology proper and theological anthropology, but here it is applied to soteriology. The issues on which the book touches are God's contemplative activity, the God/World relation, human decision making capacity, and the salvation process that can be said to occur in light of Molinist postulates. It is a tall order, indeed, especially in a relatively short 210 pages of text. Yet it is doubtful that many will say Keathley has failed to do justice to these issues, though many more will not agree with his conclusions. One must keep in mind his theological approach and that Middle Knowledge itself is not always the focus of the text. Molinism is at the heart of the work, though much of it appears to be little more than a critique and reworking of soteriological tenets that stem from Calvinism's TULIP.

Molinism presupposes human volitional capacity of a more libertarian sort than Reformed anthropology offers. Thus, in the eyes of many, Keathley's critique of Calvinism aligns him by default with Arminianism. His view of Molinism, however, admits to a far more robust notion of God's sovereign control over creation than many Arminians allow. In offering Molinism, Keathley's aim is to find a better articulated notion of God's omniscience than most Arminians express and a more palatable notion of man's freedom and responsibility than typically is offered in Calvinism.

The book is concise, almost uncomfortably so in light of the major issues taken on. Still it is clearly written, well documented, and, thankfully, published with footnotes, helpful tables, indices, and a selected bibliography. Keathley employs a theological approach to what is Molinism, why it is (re)appearing in the foreknowledge/free will debate, and why Timothy George's ROSES² reform of the TULIP is utilized. The work may be criticized for lacking the philosophical rigor of most works on Molinism, but such a critique is to ignore its self-imposed and refreshing theological approach. *Salvation and Sovereignty* should become required reading for seminarians in the field of theology, and advanced laity should welcome it as well.

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²Timothy George, *Amazing Grace: God's Initiative—Our Response* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2000), 71-83: Radical depravity, Overcoming grace, Sovereign election, Eternal life, and Singular redemption are adopted by Keathley based on George's own contrast of each point of the TULIP acronym: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. Keathley is clear to point out that George is not an advocate of Molinism.

Keathley's thesis is that the ROSES paradigm explained from a Molinist perspective is a cohesive presentation of evangelical commitments to the fullness of God's sovereign control over creation and the reality of God's design of humans who make real decisions with respect to their relation to God. Keathley's principle concern is that divine sovereignty be seen as God's *control* over creation not his *causing* of all that occurs in it. If God is the cause of all things that occur, then that impinges on God's goodness—it means he is the cause of sin. Keathley's co-concern is that humanity be seen as designed by God to have real decision making capacity yet not so as to cast God as unable to foreknow those decisions until they are made, for that ultimately impinges on God's omniscience if not his sovereignty. Molinism, Keathley says, allows for God's full sovereignty to be seen as his control over human agency of the libertarian sort, thus it provides a "Middle Way between Calvinism and Arminianism" (7). His hope is that Calvinists, accepting a Molinist perspective, can affirm that God controls all things; man contributes nothing to salvation since God is its Author and Completer, and thus individual election is both unconditional and eternally secure. He hopes that Arminians, accepting a Molinist perspective, can affirm that God is in nowise the author of sin yet controls all things without causing all things, especially with respect to human choices to receive what God offers in Christ's death for all, even if that means many will still reject it (7).

Keathley will be accused of a "bait and switch" here if Calvinists see him to offer Calvinist tenets which are non-Calvinistic. But, he is only asking for a reconsideration of basic theological positions from all sides in order that what Molinism says about the core issue under consideration might be adequately understood. The core issue is the contemplations of the divine mind (omniscience) with respect to God's creation of truly free human decision makers. Can the two components, the divine and the human, be described in a way that allows God's exhaustive foreknowledge of human decisions without imposing pre-determination on those decisions? The problem, Keathley says, is that Reformed theology over-relies on theological determinism to answer this question in an understandable effort to "protect" God's sovereignty. But, to strip the human component of its God-designed capacity for real decision making, if it exists, would be misguided. Furthermore, if the result is that all things *must* occur only as God sovereignly decrees, then God is the cause of sin and his goodness is impugned. Yet an over-reliance on human freedom to avoid this conclusion has led in recent years to the Open Theist proposal that is unpalatable for a similar reason—it impugns God's omniscience:

If one focuses on the electing decree of divine sovereignty to the exclusion of human choice, then the result is a type of Calvinism of the double-predestination variety. If one decides that human moral responsibility requires the absolute ability to choose to the contrary, then this results in a radical form of Arminianism called Open Theism, which denies that God always knows what free creatures will decide to do (9-10).

So, how does Molinism navigate between the theological Scylla and Charybdis?

The Molinist alternative, says Keathley, reconciles two biblical truths: (1) God exercises sovereign control over all of His creation, and (2) human beings are designed to make free decisions for which they are responsible yet which are fully known by God per divine omniscience. The sticking point for many is the second notion, that any libertarian

version of human choosing is Arminianism's idea that God looks down the corridors of time to be informed of what humans will do then abides by *their* choices. To protect both a robust notion of sovereignty and a biblical notion of human freedom is Keathley's goal—that God not be less than he must be, and that man not be less than God designed him to be:

Molinism teaches that God exercises His sovereignty primarily through His omniscience, and that He infallibly knows what free creatures would do in any given situation. In this way God sovereignly controls all things, while humans are also genuinely free. God is able to accomplish His will through the use of . . . His *middle knowledge*. . . a radical “compatibilism”—a Calvinist view of divine sovereignty and an Arminian view of human freedom (5).

What this proposal does is distinguish between the certainty attached to God's knowledge about human decisions (thus supplying what omniscience requires) without making God the cause of those human decisions (thus avoiding what determinism entails).

Keathley begins with a good attempt at defining Molinism, its middle knowledge component, and the biblical warrant for it (the introduction and chapter 1). He then applies Molinist commitments to the problems he sees arising from Calvinism's paradigm for salvation, which over-relies on theological determinism (chapters 3-7). In the introduction and chapter 1, Keathley proposes nothing really new if one is already familiar with the *scientia media* postulate of the sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina. For those unfamiliar with “middle knowledge” the idea is based on Molina's interaction with two theological categories of God's knowledge already discussed in the Middle Ages. Such thinkers as Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas argued for two categories or “moments” of divine knowledge: (1) God's exhaustive knowledge of all necessary truths and possible worlds and (2) God's exhaustive knowledge of *this* particular world, which he freely chose to instantiate. Keathley does not mention it, but Christian theistic proposals about divine contemplation at that time stood in contradistinction to those offered by classical pagan philosophers, such as Aristotle, who said that God's thoughts must exclude the possible or the mundane. The divine nature contemplates only pure actuality because, as Aristotle famously said, “it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks since it is the most excellent of things, and its thinking is a thinking on thinking” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Lambda 9). This is hardly a biblical idea.

Thus, what Thomas and others proposed was that God's knowledge should be categorized as *natural* and as *free*. The first was termed *natural* knowledge because it must be the *nature* of divine omniscience to know all necessary truths and possible worlds, what Keathley describes as God's exhaustive knowledge of what *could* be. Keathley's brevity at this point may cause some to wonder why this first category alone does not account for God's knowledge of this actual world if he ever *freely* chose to create one. I would ask if it arises from biblical and theological commitments to creation as *ex nihilo*, for it seems this actual world exists by creative decree and for that reason is a kind of thing different from any “possible world” for God. And if created it is not logically necessary as something God must do or which cannot be otherwise for God. Keathley might have helped the uninitiated along these lines to express more of the theological reasons for these “moments” of God's knowledge. Also some may object that this world is logically necessary for God, but any statement that God needs some state of affairs in order *to be God* is fraught with theological dangers. Obviously, creation does exist, even if it need not. That it does exist is due solely to

God's free choice to have it for whatever purpose he has in mind. Given creation, God's knowledge of it as freely created is deemed, then, to be his "*free* knowledge." Keathley speaks of this as God's exhaustive knowledge of all that was-is-will be in this actualized or instantiated realm. Little real debate occurs about these two categories or "moments" of God's knowledge.

What Molina proposed was a third category of God's knowledge, and it applies to what free creatures *would* have done had they chosen differently. Here is where the contention is found. The issue is not that God has the capacity to know such a thing as middle knowledge describes; but Keathley is not as clear as he could be with his explanation as to why it is required. And, to be fair, here is where Calvinists are likely to reject Molina's and Keathley's proposal, for it hinges on the presupposition that God designs causal agents capable of *true* decision making. *Truly* operative decision making entails choices between *real* alternatives. Then, by God's design, reality would have something to "decide between," and the non-chosen alternative must have been an option as real as the one chosen. Only then is there a need for Molinism's middle knowledge postulate to account for God's exhaustive knowledge of what *would* have been had the human chooser chosen differently. And yet it is hard to imagine that Keathley minds being "caught" here. He can ask the objector what other option they would propose. It appears the most popular is that which he is critiquing, that all is predetermined at some level by God, thus what God does concerning our "choices" (chosen or not) is moot if they are merely apparent. All that occurs can be cached in either the *natural* or *free* "moments" of divine knowledge. But, what if humans are meant to be *true* decision makers by God's design? How do we categorize his knowledge of that which they could but do not choose? God would seem to know these things within his *natural* knowledge of all possible worlds, yet in this case God's knowledge of the real, actual, instantiated world is in view, for it is in *this* world that real options offered were never chosen. So, why not place these in God's *free* knowledge for that reason? They are not, simply because they never *do* occur. So, as things "counter-to the fact," Molina would place these objects of divine knowledge in the *middle* knowledge category.

Although Keathley mentions "the counterfactuals of human freedom," which are somewhat the "flip-side" of the facts that *do* occur (35-39), a more philosophical approach to Molinism may be in order for interested readers. Keathley's failure to "ground" the truth of these counterfactuals also leaves him open to the typical line of attack against the Molinist postulate that Calvinists frequently make. Those of us much more interested in theological considerations (especially regarding anthropology and soteriology) will be able to excuse this omission and accept that what "grounds" the truth of such counterfactuals appears to be reality itself *if* it is the case that God creates a world in which human agents make real choices between real alternatives. If God offers real options, even those for which no one opts, they are grounded in his offer of them. And the very nature of the world, our perception of ourselves, and the testimony of Scripture seem to agree that options do *in fact* lie before us as decision makers. It may be that Keathley himself will provide more direction in an article on this issue.

In Chapter 1, "The Biblical Case for Molinism," several highlights can be found. Keathley's account explains how Molinism identifies counterfactuals of human freedom in Scripture. In such cases, things that *could be* actually never occur, yet *would* have entailed certain things had they been chosen. Keathley explains a number of passages in this way:

Gen 19:2-3; 1 Sam 13:13-14; 2 Kgs 13:19; Isa 38:1-5; Amos 7:1-6; Matt 13:57-58/Mk 6:47-48; Matt 23:37; Acts 5:4; 1 Cor 10:13; and Jas 1:13-15. Yet this biblical case is not all that the chapter includes. Keathley provides more warrant for Molinism as a coherent alternative to Calvinism, notes God's allowance of contingencies, and maintains his freedom and righteousness even if human choices, even to sin, occur. Keathley's explanation of the relation between foreknowledge and necessity in this section should not be missed (31-34).

Chapter 2 asks, "Does God Desire the Salvation of All?" Keathley argues that in TULIP soteriology the doctrine of election by sovereign decree tends to exclude any notion of *real* human decision making in salvation. Molinism, of course, contains human agency as a premise—God's sovereign control of all things in creation includes the salvation of humans with *real* decision making capacity. Salvation can be divinely provided and genuinely universal as an offer to all who will receive it by faith, yet it is applied only to those who receive it by faith.³ Calvinists are sure to point out that Keathley's question needs to distinguish between God's desire and will, but he is not drawn into this discussion, for even to admit the distinction does not alleviate the objector from the double-predestination lurking in it. He contends that God's desire must be to save all, and he marshals a host of Calvinists who join in opposing the usual definition of "Limited Atonement." He makes it clear that the alternative view, "General Atonement," is by no means *universalism*—the notion that all are saved. The more weighty issue for Keathley's thesis is the consideration of God's complex will. This is a fascinating discussion that is exactly why Molinism is employed in his argument.

If God's will is *simplex*, then God's creation of people as saved or condemned is a status necessarily pre-determined in accordance with that will. This is the basis for decretal theology (48-51). It can be nuanced to mean God's unfathomable plan to demonstrate his sovereignty *via* humans who he opts to choose to save or to choose to leave condemn, but humans in this case are not causal agents (designed with a capacity to choose between contraries). Fatalism looms. Keathley's key proposal is for a *complex* notion of God's will utilizing the terminology of God's antecedent and consequent wills (58-61).

Conditional propositions often are posed as "if . . . then" statements in which the "if" part is the *antecedent* and the "then" part is the *consequent*. Keathley describes the operation of God's will regarding salvation as having these two parts. God's *antecedent* will involves his lavish graciousness to supply Christ's all-sufficient death to atone for all sin for all time for all who trust by faith in this sovereign provision. Keathley is to be read to mean that it is *antecedent*, literally "standing before," for it involves God's sole work to provide an all-encompassing means to atone for human sin—only God can do this. But the proposition, as a conditional concept, is not fully stated without the consequent portion which still must follow: *then* those who so trust in Christ benefit from what was antecedently provided. In one sense, what consequently happens is based on the trust a person has in the thing that was offered yet only in terms of its individual application. What is more important is that *someone else*, the provider of the antecedent has acted antecedently regardless of any subsequent choice for or against the offer. Any choice that is made is possible *only because* that antecedent provision has been instantiated. Thus, the *sole work* of God is to set up this

³Faith is defined in terms of decision making of a particular kind and prior to conversion (116-24).

entire conditional, which is in my mind Keathley's entire point. Referring to salvation as "monergistic" surely will rankle the Reformed, but Molinism warrants it. One cannot state as some critics have that he is unaware of or disingenuous about "monergism." He simply is explaining what Molinism would mean by it. Even if he opted for different terminology, the question remains whether human salvation is *only* God's simplex will to predetermine to whom it applies, or if a complex notion of God's will better accounts for what occurs: God antecedently provides and humans consequently must receive a provision for salvation by faith that only God could accomplish and only God could offer. Any other notion may account for God's *sovereignty*, but Keathley's contention is that Molinism provides a full notion of God's *goodness* as well.

Another highlight of the text is Chapter 3, "R is for Radical Depravity," which provides Keathley's description of Jonathan Edwards's notion commonly advanced in Calvinist circles as compatibilism. Here Keathley explains his own view of "soft-libertarianism." All of this forms the basis for the conditional approach to salvation in chapter 4, but already previewed in the paragraph above. He describes Reformed thought today as much more dependent on Edwards than Calvin, for Edwardsian compatibilism is the means for describing how God's unconditional election is fleshed out through human "free choice" (as Edwards defines it). The more mildly Reformed may hope that by this route they escape double-predestination (65-69). Keathley argues, however, that even if compatibilism were to explain God as sovereign, it commits to a deterministic notion of human existence. And though Edwards has many prominent followers, such as John Feinberg, John Frame, John Piper, R. C. Sproul, Bruce Ware, et al. (67, n. 9), the question remains whether God designed us to make *real* choices or merely apparent ones. If human agency is in play, one must consider divine sovereignty from another perspective that avoids any view of divine *causation* of all that occurs. Keathley says Molinism offers the perspective that maintains God's sovereign control while preserving God's holiness, righteousness, goodness, and love by properly defining humans as real decision makers in the soft libertarian sense. But this leads to the point that theological anthropology, not theology proper or soteriology, is in need of evangelicals' full attention.

Salvation and Sovereignty may not be the best resource for those unfamiliar with Molinism yet who wish to become fully conversant in it. This work is, however, the best place for those who wish to engage Molinism for the first time because of the theological perspective Keathley employs. This book probably will not persuade Calvinists to switch allegiances, or will it result in a groundswell of support for ROSES as the new soteriological acronym. However, his fine work likely will grow in influence as evangelical readers must engage its perspective in order to engage the full debate over sovereignty and human freedom. No better work is currently available on the theological ramifications of the Molinist postulate. It will be interesting to see if Keathley offers a more thorough explanation of Molinism itself via this theological focus, especially with regard to theological anthropology.

It would be well to note the author's concluding remarks:

The Molinist model of salvation and the sovereignty of God endeavors to maintain the biblical balance of certainty and contingency, confidence and urgency. Our sovereign God saves. Despite that God granted genuine freedom to us; despite

that we promptly abused that freedom to descend into darkness and death; despite that, as fallen creatures, we loved our sin and were without love for Him—despite all these things—God is perfectly accomplishing His plan of salvation. And He is doing so in a way that maintains His perfect integrity from evil and does not turn humans, who He created in His image, into robots. Salvation is of the Lord, all of grace and for His glory (210).

The *Abstracts and Principles* is one of Southern Baptists' founding documents for academic life. Its article on divine providence states: "God from eternity decrees or permits all things that come to pass and perpetually upholds, directs, and governs all creatures and all events; yet so as not in any wise to be author or approver of sin nor to destroy the free will and responsibility of intelligent creatures." I have signed that document with my colleague Ken Keathley; and with integrity, I concur that Molinism accords with it well.