

MORE ON OPEN THEISM

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Do we need more on Open Theism?¹ A recently published exchange between Christopher Hall and John Sanders urges us to adopt a correct frame of mind in discussing this matter, for the debate has too frequently failed to display it.² It comes with commendations on this score from a broad group of theologians, commendations we must surely take to heart. In the course of this exchange, Sanders occasionally refers to the reactions he has encountered to his advocacy of OT and if his account of things is correct – which I have no reason to doubt – it is sad indeed. Important things are surely at stake in this debate, but I am not persuaded that they have always been correctly identified. What follows involves a revisit, which may appear to be a tedious re-covering of old ground. Nevertheless, I hope that it is of use. While I am myself critical of OT, I am also critical of standard criticisms, so after picking my way through those features of OT that are germane to the point that I am trying to make, I briefly turn to two of its leading critics. Finally, I suggest an agenda for future discussion.

GOD: THE PORTRAIT

It was in 1994 that a group of five authors, headed up by Clark Pinnock, published *The Openness of God*. It began:

¹ Henceforth, OT. This paper is substantially the one presented to the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society in spring, 2003 and published by request. I mention this because a piece by Iain D. Campbell, 'Open Thoughts on Open Theism', which had not appeared then, has now appeared in *SBET* 21.1 (2003). My general response to it is implicit in what I say about Bruce Ware and John Frame below.

² Christopher A. Hall and John Sanders, *Does God Have a Future? A Debate on Divine Providence* (Grand Rapids, 2003). I myself have been deemed guilty on this score: see Alan Padgett's letter in *Books & Culture* 6.1 (2000), pp. 6f. This number contains a response by John Sanders to my piece on his book, *The God Who Risks*, in the previous number of the same journal (5.6, 1999). I sought to remove misunderstandings of it in 6.2 (2000), pp. 6-8.

This book presents an understanding of God's nature and relationship with his creatures, which we call the openness of God.... God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us. The Christian life involves a genuine interaction between God and human beings. We respond to God's gracious initiatives and God responds to our responses.... God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting his own plans to fit the changing situation. God does not control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving input from his creatures. In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being.³

Publishing his Didsbury Lectures, delivered six years later, Pinnock expressed surprise at the furore that this book had caused, and described some of the reactions.⁴ In a robust book-length riposte to *The Openness of God*, which came out the year before these were published, Bruce Ware documented the troubles caused in the train of OT for the Baptist General Conference (USA), contrasting the doings of the Conference with the relevant responses of the Southern Baptist Convention.⁵ At the time of writing, OT is and has been the subject of ongoing deliberation, at formal level, in the Evangelical Theological Society (ETS).

Two questions are apparently at stake. The first is substantive: what should we affirm about God? The second concerns the boundaries of evangelicalism: what are they? I shall not be dealing directly with the latter question here. And I shall be concentrating more on what should not than on what should be affirmed on the former question. Why that is, and why I often risk substituting assertion for argumentation, and then the interrogative for the assertive, will emerge as we go along.

In his essay on 'A Philosophical Perspective' in that original controversial volume, William Hasker referred back to the previous essay, written by Clark Pinnock. 'Any reader who does not find that picture of

³ *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois/Carlisle, 1994), p. 7. From now on, page references to volumes considered will usually be found in the text of the article.

⁴ Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids/Carlisle, 2001), 'Preface'.

⁵ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Illinois, 2000), pp. 21ff.

God attractive is unlikely to be convinced by any of the arguments offered in this book' (p. 150). Two things are important about this statement. The first is the distinction between picture and argument; the second the appeal to what attracts us in a particular doctrinal direction. It is the first of these that we take up here. Arguments over OT are standardly arguments over concepts. In OT, against complete divine foreordination, it is claimed that God does not ordain or control everything: there is free will and an open future. Against exhaustive divine foreknowledge, it is argued that the future, inasmuch as it is open, is not known to God, though there is much that he does know about the future. Against divine immutability, it is averred that God changes his mind. And against divine infallibility, it is contended that God not only changes his mind, but is capable of mistaken beliefs. In all this, what is most arresting about OT is the *picture* of God yielded by the vocabulary used to describe him and I believe that William Hasker was right to imply that initial or fundamental responses to that will steer our engagement with the detailed argumentation. A picture can look right or wrong (or it can attract or turn us away) before we examine the elements that compose it. Clearly, we can not distinguish sharply between picture and concept and I shall not try to do so. But I shall be initially steering away from a certain kind of conceptual approach and towards a certain kind of pictorial approach.⁶

So what is the picture? In his contribution to that first volume on *The Openness of God*, Richard Rice discusses the passage in Exodus 32 where Moses entreats God to spare the people punishment, to the point where 'the Lord relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened' (v.14).⁷ 'A number of Bible scholars', says Rice, 'do see this dramatic passage as a clear indication that God underwent a real and important change.... Moses begs God to repent, using the very same word that the prophets employed in their appeals to backsliding Israel, to change his plan to destroy Israel and so to remain loyal to the great revelation of himself in which he promised to be with them.' As Fretheim rightly notes, 'Moses genuinely influenced God's final decision', which was pending thereto. God has effectively asked Moses to contribute to his

⁶ Nothing in my argument hinges on whether or not this distinction is felicitously offered. It can be ignored by any reader who doesn't think that it works. An adumbration of the distinction would obviously require a separate discussion.

⁷ 'Biblical Support for a New Perspective'. Ware notes that Rice had published a volume originally entitled *The Openness of God*, back in 1980 (*op. cit.*, 31, n.1). For what follows, see pp. 28f.

deliberations, which Moses does by appealing to 'God's reasonableness and reputation', reminding 'God of his own promise' and evoking an immediate change of mind from God.

Why repeat phrases from Rice's decade-old essay which themselves appear simply to repeat, paraphrase or obviously draw out what is manifestly in the passage itself? It is because, on this reading, the following seems to be a faithful rendering of how God could have closed the interview. I.e., it is an entirely appropriate rendering of the state of affairs which, as far as I can tell, involves no caricature:

Moses – I am so grateful to you. You know, in a burst of outraged anger, I'd really lost it. I really got things out of perspective. Now I think of it, you're right. If I had destroyed this people, it would have gone against everything I've been working for. Moses, my friend, thanks for helping me work through my anger. My word – if you hadn't got up this morning and had your head screwed on right, can you imagine what I might have ended up doing? I'd have cut off the Hebrew Bible at Exodus 32.

Is there anything wrong with that, including the sense (if not the form) of its final rhetorical flourish? I presume that Rice finds nothing seriously wrong with this account. Now I am not trying to survey even a small fraction of the literature by open theists, but, even if they are not agreed on everything, I presume that they can not take *serious* exception to this rendering of things and regard this portrayal as an enormity. Others will feel the opposite, regarding it as a vindication of the hermeneutical conviction that some sort of 'accommodation' is going on in this passage.⁸

Let us note some other descriptive words and phrases that have gone into the portrayal of God.⁹ For Rice, God 'is deeply sensitive and responsive to human experience' (p. 43). He is, Sanders says in the next essay, 'resourceful' and 'creative' (p. 97). Pinnock, in the essay to which Hasker alluded, speaks of God as 'flexible', as one who 'does not insist on doing things his way. God', in fact, 'will adjust his own plans because he is sensitive to what humans think and do' (p. 116). Moreover, we find him 'delighting in a universe which he does not totally control' (p. 117); he 'learns things and (I would add) enjoys learning them' (p. 123). And David Basinger, in the essay after Pinnock's, says that petitionary prayer is a

⁸ I do not have in mind a particular theory of accommodation nor does anything hang on the use of this word.

⁹ These words or phrases are in themselves familiar enough, e.g., in Process theology. What interests us here is their use in the context of an evangelical proposal.

'means whereby we grant God the permission to influence our non-cognitive states of mind...' (p. 162). He adds: 'We as Christians do not only believe it is important that we share our thoughts and concerns with God. We also want God to share his thoughts and concerns with us.' He also says: 'God is often as disappointed as we are that someone's earthly existence has ended at an early stage or that someone is experiencing severe depression or that someone is being tortured' (p. 170). Although I am just describing here, a comment on these last words is in order. No one should ever experience disappointment that anyone is being tortured, experiencing depression or has died young. 'Disappointment' is hardly the word for it, and even less God's word for it. These are not semantic *trivia*. Is it not clear that, God aside, there is considerable trivialisation of human suffering going on? I refer, of course, to this particular example, not to what all other open theists say.

Between *The Openness of God* and *Most Moved Mover*, the two principal works advocating OT were those of John Sanders and Gregory Boyd.¹⁰ I select one passage from each to illustrate the characterisation of God to which I want to draw attention. Sanders discusses thus how some prophetic predictions are explicable. They may be

statements about what will happen based on God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present. In other words, given the depth and breadth of God's knowledge of the present situation, God forecasts what he thinks will happen. In this regard God is the consummate social scientist predicting what will happen. God's ability to predict the future in this way is far more accurate than any human forecaster's, however, since God has exhaustive access to all past and present knowledge (p. 131).

Then, in order to show how we might understand a divine determination which is limited and not comprehensive, Boyd has a short discussion of 'Freedom and Determinism in Science and Life'. He says:

The balance between predictable and unpredictable aspects of reality is illustrated in many areas of our everyday lives. For example, though insurance and advertising agencies make money by utilizing statistics to predict general group behavior, they are still incapable of predicting individual behavior.... In this light, it should not be difficult to understand how God could predestine the crucifixion without predestining or

¹⁰ John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Illinois, 1998); Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, 2000).

foreknowing who, specifically, would carry it out. To put the matter crudely, God would simply have to possess a perfect version of what insurance and advertising agencies possess (p. 46).¹¹

In *Most Moved Mover*, we get the following. In the incident of the golden calf, 'God became exasperated and threatened to give up on Israel altogether' (p. 43). God himself 'is wise, resourceful and can cope with all contingencies' (p. 52). 'To work with a history where the outcomes are predetermined and with creatures that are able to resist him is a challenge and, no doubt, a source of great delight even for God' (p. 95). (Comment: resistance, we must remember, is sin, so delight is apparently taken in our ability to sin.) 'God is a highly resourceful and capable person' (p. 100). 'God is a wise and resourceful person' (p. 102). He has to be 'resourceful, competent and innovative' to carry something out (p. 102). That 'something' is his world-project and '[i]t takes wisdom to do that if things do not go well. God has to think about how to bring his purposes to completion. I see this in Romans 9-11 where God wants to have mercy upon Jew and Gentile alike, but faces the problem of Israel's unbelief. Paul explains how God is working on it' (p. 103). Finally, 'God is a flexible and effective worker' (p. 139).

Rattling off this catena of quotations enables us to see the portrayal of God that backgrounds Gregory Boyd's now fairly familiar story about Suzanne.¹² It should be read fully, but the gist is that she entered prayerfully, thoughtfully and with appropriate support from pastor and friends, into a marriage that appeared clearly to have God's blessing. She and her husband trained for the mission field, but he became repeatedly unfaithful and also violent towards her. He eventually left her for his lover, and left Suzanne pregnant. In the midst of it all, 'Suzanne could not fathom how the Lord could respond to her lifelong prayers' (for the story goes further back than I have indicated) 'by setting her up with a man he *knew* would do this to her and her child.' For, on her theology, this is what God had done. Gregory Boyd could only get through to her when he 'suggested to her that God felt as much regret over the confirmation he had given Suzanne as he did about his decision to make Saul king of Israel...'. God's confirmation was understandable, for the prospects for Suzanne and

¹¹ I want to give due weight to the fact that Boyd is somewhat modifying his description by 'put[ting] the matter crudely' and, indeed, that Sanders is saying that God is such '*in this regard*' (my italics).

¹² *Op. cit.*, pp. 103ff. I am thinking of the background in terms of characteristic descriptions, not literature produced by open theists.

husband were good, but he got it wrong all the same and came to see that he had got it wrong.

I am somewhat loth to relay this story again, and make theological capital out of it, since our first reaction should be of sadness on account of Suzanne's suffering. Certainly, we do not want a slick pastoral response. On this score, there is much to ponder. Indeed, my own conviction is that systematic theology has suffered greatly by being done outside a pastoral context.¹³ In this case, pastoral theology and practice needs to take at least two things into account. The first is that God does not usually give some guarantees that some particular event will not befall us and had the theological question ever come up before Suzanne was married, it should have been pointed out that the Christian life must be lived in the knowledge that there is little, if anything, of this nature against which he promises us immunity.¹⁴ The second is whether the problem would have been the same or different had Suzanne's husband remained faithful to her, but died within a week of entering the mission field.

The fact, however, remains that it would have been far better for Boyd to have said that he did not know what to say, than to say what he did. Consider the situation, on the OT – or Boyd's – view of things. Here is God, who has been around for thousands and thousands of years. He has seen everything that there is to see. He knows every single state of affairs that there has ever been including, sadly, many similar ones to this. He has learned voluminous amounts about the human condition. Not only so, but he knows everything about the human heart right now. Every flicker of motivation, every rustle of intention, every germ of a tendency, is known to him. This is what open theists maintain. *And he still gets it wrong.* He gave Suzanne confirmation, on the basis of this experience, and he blew it. He now deeply regrets his own misjudgement. For myself, I have to say that if God could do that after all these millennia I, personally, could hardly trust him for any wisdom again. There is no reason to trust his confirmation or guidance, on any given occasion, though one might hope that God had got it right much of the time. The least I should have expected God to do was to say to himself: 'I've got it wrong before, plenty of times, despite my vast experience. So I shall *not* give Suzanne the kind of confirmation that I shall afterwards regret having given.' At least, such a

¹³ One of the abiding contributions of the Puritans lies in the fusion of systematic and pastoral sensitivities.

¹⁴ I have to be cryptic here and, amongst other things, assume the situation that currently prevails to a large extent in Western Christianity and Western churches. Even this assumption has to be stated cryptically!

God would display a little self-knowledge. The strongest statement Christopher Hall makes, in his exchange with Sanders, is that he finds 'the possibility of divine error to be terribly problematic and its implications, theologically and pastorally horrific'.¹⁵

I do not know what all open theists think of this tale. But, even if some are very unhappy with it, it does not obviously or badly misfit the kind of descriptions of God which I have listed. And even if not all open theists use the same descriptives, the ones to whom I have referred, do they radically and unqualifiedly distance themselves from those that I have mentioned, when not using them themselves? Actually, I am not clear how to interpret the distinction as it is drawn in some of the literature of OT, between literal and metaphorical predications of God. Though religious language is dubbed metaphorical, the logic of the predications appears to be the logic of the literal. God is literally competent and resourceful, ignorant, liable to make mistakes *etc.* Language here is being used univocally or at least with extremely close analogy. We are not to reduce the kind of language about God we find in Exodus 32, for example, to anthropomorphism of an accommodationist kind. God is not other than we find him represented in the narrative, at least in terms of ignorance or relenting. I am not saying that there is incoherence in the OT line on literal and metaphorical usage, just that I find the accounts incomplete in those specific works that I have mentioned. Be this as it may, the *picture* of God in OT is one that many of us find completely different from the biblical portrayal of God, when the Old Testament is read as a whole, or when read in light of the New. All I do for the moment is make the stark statement that we differ, by focussing on the portrayal. But if we now go beyond picture and statement to argument, the pivotal questions are surely hermeneutical.

HERMENEUTICS

Enquiring about how we are to 'detect the presence' of anthropomorphisms, Henri Blocher remarks that '[c]ontradiction with other statements, if taken literally, is evidence which corresponds to the standard method with metaphors. Any hint of a metalinguistic kind, in the text, may also help. The tone and style of the context will increase or lessen

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, 132. Not in the combative interests of comparison, but lest I give the impression of unremitting hostility to OT (which I do not in the least feel) I should say that I believe that Sanders is much the more convincing in this exchange.

probabilities, especially if we can ascertain the writer's intent or *scopus*.¹⁶ I quote him particularly because he sums up by saying: 'We shall do well, however, to leave a wide margin for doubt.' This is surely the case. I am not proposing complete hermeneutical mastery as a condition for assessing OT. But at least four hermeneutical considerations are important.

1. *Literary genre*

What I miss in the principal advocacies of OT is a consideration of how biblical language, especially biblical Hebrew, works. For example, we need to study the relevance of the kinds of things that George Caird was laying bare many years ago.¹⁷ If '[h]yperbole and parataxis go readily in double harness' in biblical Hebrew, what does that do to the way OT uses the biblical text to secure its positions?¹⁸ When Caird characterises the language of Ezekiel 1:26-28 ('the likeness of the appearance of the glory of God') as 'a triple guard against literality', how apt is that?¹⁹ If it is, does this inform us about our reading of Pentateuchal and historical narratives? Does language in the Old Testament evolve from the metaphorical to the literal?²⁰ If so, what are the hermeneutical implications and implications for a broad biblical theology? These are scarcely novel questions, but I do not myself see how OT can advance its case persuasively without detailed attention to issues of this kind.²¹

2. *Progressive revelation*

I miss a discussion of this as well. Are not Genesis and Exodus to be read in the light of Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel? If not, why not? Does not God emerge into gradually greater light as the Scriptures develop? I am not trying to foreclose the question, as though OT could not in principle maintain its position on a strong progressivist position, just to note its hermeneutical importance and its hermeneutical neglect.

3. *The christological principle*

How does the Old Testament language about God square with the revelation of God in Christ? Here he is, the one who 'knew what was in a

¹⁶ 'Divine Immutability', in Nigel M. Cameron (ed.), *The Power and Weakness of God* (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 5.

¹⁷ G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (London, 1980).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

²⁰ Not that Caird, in this volume, sees things quite as simply as this.

²¹ Although they draw on the work of biblical scholars, the openness theologians that I discuss do not attend to these issues in their proposals.

man' (John 2.25), and so knew, as someone put it, what was in the man in front of him. And this is the incarnate Jesus subject, we may suppose, to practical limitations of knowledge and experience compared with the Father. Does the figure who moves through the pages of the Gospels appear even remotely like someone who might apologise for having given unwise confirmation, with devastating consequences, which he later regrets having given? And are we not to read the Pentateuchal or historical narratives about God in the company and in the light of Jesus?

In relation to christology, Sanders is forced to christological compromise in order to make good his argument that the death of Jesus was not foreordained. He claims that, rather, Father and Son come together to see that there is no other way.²² It is crucial, of course, that OT sets itself up as an *evangelical* theology, respecting better than classical theism, the actual text of Scripture. 'How are the predictions that Jesus himself made to be explained, since these are sometimes understood as implying exhaustive foreknowledge?' Sanders asks, as he contends against this implication. In response, he accedes to Raymond Brown's speculation: '...One may also wonder if the original predictions were as exact as they have now come to us'. There is nothing at all startling about this position, in the light of centuries of biblical scholarship. However, in the present context, it is surely revealing. The text of Scripture is taken, we are told, more seriously than classical theists take it. In this case, where the text fails to deliver, it apparently becomes subject to the kind of standard critical procedure whose presuppositions 'evangelicals' have (traditionally) routinely sought to challenge.²³ Granted, evangelicals may differ on such things and I am only giving a single example from a single author. It is a telling one, nevertheless, for a theological constraint appears to be dictating a critical conclusion. As a matter of general principle, some will procedurally defend that. What is significant is the move made in the context of an enterprise that emphasises its optimal handling of the actual texts in Scripture as they stand.

²² *The God Who Risks*, pp. 134f.

²³ I am thinking of the evangelicalism which, *inter alia*, open theists want to persuade. Someone like James Denney, for example, had an approach to critical questions that led to what I am sorry to say was a dishonest editing of his work in the standard R. V. G. Tasker edition of *The Death of Christ* (London; 1951).

4. *Logical entailments*

We must ask about the strict entailments of a 'literal' reading of the text, as we decide on whether or not it is 'anthropomorphic'. For example, it is often argued that the book of Jonah plainly reveals that God changed his course of action, having changed his mind (Jonah 3:10). Now comparison with a text like Jeremiah 18:1-10 shows us that what can look like the vocabulary of strict determination, is not that at all: it is a conditional warning. But my point here concerns the hermeneutical necessity of working on entailments. Are we to take Jonah as telling God, in effect: 'I knew all along that you would probably do what you are now doing'? On a standard open theist reading – if that is not an unfair generalisation – Jonah understood God better than God understood himself. For God, genuinely thinking that he would destroy Nineveh, genuinely changed his mind, whereas Jonah, knowing that God was prone to such merciful agendas, strongly suspected what God seems not to have suspected, namely that God would end up proving merciful. He then turns out to be right, and to be more perceptive than was God. Such an entailment should rule out the reading of Jonah that yields it. Open theists do, of course, enquire about the logical implications of texts. But their enquiry seems, at points such as this, not to be rigorously integrated into a sustained hermeneutical exercise for the detection of anthropomorphism.²⁴

Much more might be considered here, including the old chestnut of the difference between doctrinal statement and narrative description. But we move on here because, essential to the argument of this paper is that major responses to OT are also open to criticism. Two are particularly telling: Bruce Ware's work, to which I have already alluded, and John Frame's volume, *No Other God*.²⁵ If I deal with these relatively briefly, it is because OT itself is the focus of this article.

CHALLENGES

After sketching the open theist proposal and its 'perceived benefits', Bruce Ware devotes the second, and major, part of his book to an assessment of 'open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge' and a defence of the claim that Scripture affirms what OT denies. He believes that a great deal is at stake in all this, concluding this part with a chapter titled: 'The

²⁴ As a matter of fact, I am not sure whether the argument over the text in Jonah, for example, is best characterised in terms of 'anthropomorphism', but that is not especially important at this juncture.

²⁵ John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (New Jersey, 2001).

God Who Risks and the Assault on God's Wisdom'. But in the third part, when he shifts to the handling of the question of suffering and evil in light of his view that God not only foreknows, but also controls, the future, he appears oblivious to the problems in his own account. And the problem of evil is one of the big motors – if not the biggest – driving open theism.²⁶

God, says Ware, 'never helplessly watches while some tragedy occurs, wishing it were different. Rather, God is at work to bring about good. He is altogether active in all the events of our lives, never merely passively – and certainly not helplessly – watching' (p. 193). But the obvious question to ask is this. If God is not helpless, does he wish it were different? And what are the implications of answering either 'yes' or 'no'? And what of his activity in relation to unbelievers' suffering, if believers have access to divine comfort? These are standard questions but, I am afraid, blithely overlooked by Ware. He criticises OT's disavowal of God's promises to bring good out of evil, but subjects his own position on the matter to no such scrutiny. '...God is fully just and righteous in causing, ultimately, all the suffering Job has experienced' (p. 202) – so Ware says, as though this presented no difficulty. Does God, then, justly cause all the suffering that there is? '*God is in absolute control, and God is absolutely good. On these twin truths we find rest, comfort, hope*' (p. 207). But it is precisely the difficulty of making consistent these beliefs in light of evil and suffering that drives people to alternatives to classical theism, if not away from God altogether. Ware frequently points out that, on the open theist position, there is just as great a problem of suffering as on the classical view. Perhaps so, but an open theist can respond that Ware is just as little able to address it successfully as he alleges that open theists are.²⁷ 'God ordains evil', says Ware, without pausing to address the obvious and enormous problem with that (p. 212). Is it better, he asks, for God to be in control, or not, when there is evil and suffering? But he does not ask what theological sense we are to make of the claim that he controls it by ordaining it. He consistently ignores the *tu quoque* riposte to his own arguments, while often deploying it against OT.

What, then, of John Frame's *No Other God*? Frame identifies the problem with OT as one rooted in its belief in human libertarian freedom. Its logic is the logic of Arminianism taken to its extreme. Consequently, he attacks the notion of libertarian freedom. But, in insisting on playing

²⁶ See the very first paragraph of Sanders' book. It suffices for now just to recognise that it is one of the big issues.

²⁷ Christopher Hall's persistent refusal to respond to John Sanders on this point is one of the weaknesses in his discussion.

on this field, he lands us back with the traditional difficulties many Arminians face with Calvinism and, indeed, back with a failure to reckon on the difficulties of his own Calvinism. The question: 'Does God Know Everything in Advance?' is asked in chapter 12, but the governing interest is revealed in the titles of preceding chapters: 'Is God's Will the Ultimate Explanation of Everything?', 'How Do Open Theists Reply?', 'Is God's Will Irresistible?' and 'Do We Have Genuine Freedom?'. In the first of these ('Is God's Will the Ultimate Explanation of Everything?') he quotes Genesis 50:20: 'God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives', the passage where Joseph is referring to the outcome of his exile to Egypt. Responding to Sanders, Frame says that Sanders

insists that 'the text does not say that God caused or necessitated these events', despite the word 'intended'. Rather, in Sanders's view, the text says only that God brought good out of evil. But Sanders offers no argument for his interpretation, which contradicts not only the straightforward meaning of the text, but the sustained contextual emphasis on divine agency (p. 60, n.3).

This is a touch ironic, for Frame's own appeal to the 'straightforward meaning of the text' skips over hermeneutical issues which he insists on raising when Sanders appeals to the straightforward meaning of texts. Possibly, this criticism needs modification, as Frame has attempted to set out certain hermeneutical principles earlier, albeit briefly. What matters more is the unblushing assertion that God causes evil. No awareness is shown, even if it is felt, of the problem this raises.²⁸ 'God,' he says a few pages later, 'who forms the purposes of our heart, also decided the steps we will take to carry out those purposes', quoting Proverbs 16:9: 'In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps' (p. 65). But he practises here exactly what he accuses Sanders of practising, namely, reading the text against what it is itself saying. For the text suggests that it is precisely *not* God who forms the purposes of the heart. The exegetical mistake compounds a consistent failure to take on board the difficulties with affirming God's detailed ordaining control.

²⁸ It is a pity that Frame did not distance himself more emphatically from Jay Adams on the question of evil, in Frame's very helpful study of *Apologetics to the Glory of God: an introduction* (Phillipsburg, 1994), Appendix B. Adams seems to think that evil exists because God is internally wrathful, and brings evil into existence in order to express that. This is a sad perversion of the Christian view of God.

In my view, the volumes by Ware and Frame, whatever their merits in rebutting OT, take the debate in an unfortunate direction. Issues become concentrated on the Calvinist view that God ordains everything, including evil acts. Now, much in *Most Moved Mover*, for example, and *God who Risks* are, indeed, a response to the claim that God actively controls everything. But what is distinctive in OT is not its repudiation of Calvinism. It is the non- (traditionally) Arminian portrayal of God. Surely, it is mistaken to concentrate on reading OT as a variant of Arminianism, even as Arminianism taken to its logical conclusion. To the extent that both Calvinists and open theists make much of the logical difficulties of traditional Arminianism, we are being distracted from theologically fruitful discussion. I shall try to illustrate this.

Both OT and Calvinism regard as mistaken the traditional Arminian belief that divine foreknowledge and human freedom are compatible. OT wants to resolve the business by curtailing foreknowledge, Calvinists by curtailing freedom. The alleged logical difficulty with it is roughly this. Supposing I say that I am free at time *t* to drink coffee or to drink cocoa. Suppose God foreknows that I shall drink coffee. I can not do what God foreknows that I shall not do, for this falsifies God's knowledge, which is impossible. Therefore, I can not drink cocoa. And therefore, if I drink the coffee, I do so without doing so freely.

Consider a response to this. To say that God foreknows that I shall drink coffee is an incomplete description of what is foreknown. What God foreknows is that I shall freely drink coffee. What must come about now is not my drinking of coffee, *simpliciter*, but my freely drinking coffee. 'Necessarily, I shall drink coffee' means: 'God foreknows that I shall drink coffee, so it is necessarily the case that I shall drink it', not: 'I shall drink coffee necessarily rather than freely'. So am I free to drink cocoa? Yes. So am I free to do what God knows I shall not do? Yes: I am free in the sense that I have the power at *t*. But I certainly shall not drink tea. It is not that I *can* not do what God knows I shall not do. It is, rather, that I never *shall* do what God knows I shall not do. In this scenario, God knows the future as we know the past, as a *fait accompli*, but by so knowing it, he no more robs freedom of its place than he does by virtue of his knowing the past.

This is a compressed argument for the compatibility of divine foreknowledge and the relevant sort of human freedom. What is the point of going into it? This: I should not want to build a theology on the supposed logical incoherence of this defence of the compatibility of foreknowledge and freedom. The argument may certainly turn out to be unsound, but that does not matter. What matters is that its defence or its dismantling involve logical operations which are too detailed and

susceptible to error to be made the secure basis of theological conviction. If there are theological grounds for denying either exhaustive foreknowledge, or libertarian freedom, that is important for the formation of our substantive convictions. The same is the case if there is some *manifest* and manifestly *conclusive* logical or philosophical difficulty in any argument for the compatibility of foreknowledge and freedom.²⁹ But nothing should be made to hang on the supposed logical incoherence of the argument that I have spelled out. Nor, I should add, should anything be made to hang on a logical defence of its coherence.³⁰

The point is that a discussion of the internal logic of Arminianism in the midst of the OT debate surely complicates the issue from both sides. More broadly, before we re-open the Calvinist-Arminian debate in the context of OT, we surely need to attend to what seems to me an OT *distinctive*, namely its portrayal of God in an avowedly evangelical tradition.³¹ My problem is that the reiteration by Ware and Frame of Calvinist convictions in *this* context, constitutes a strong element of distraction, if we want to get at the fundamental issues. What, then, of the OT critique of Calvinism? Open theists strengthen their position if they are able to say, as Ware and Frame help them to say, that the debate over OT is a debate with Calvinism. This may seem extraordinarily arrogant on my part, as though open theists were not free to decide what they want to say the debate is about! But, obviously, that is not my point. If they want to rehearse the difficulties of Calvinism, that is one thing, wherever our theological sympathies lie. And they may well be justified in trying to press Arminianism along a more logical path, though, as I say, it seems to me difficult to settle anything important here by an examination of the logical compatibility of foreknowledge and freedom. But the heart of the matter is surely the picture of God that is offered by OT, the accuracy, or otherwise, of that representation of the biblical portrayal of God and the concepts tied to that picture in particular.

CONCLUSION

It is easy to pontificate from a position of safety, bravely calling a plague on both your houses from the spectator stand. Of course, I have my views

²⁹ Granted that what counts as manifest will differ from person to person.

³⁰ It should be added that it might be as important to establish that something is not demonstrably incoherent as to demonstrate its coherence.

³¹ 'Distinctive' need not mean 'absolutely original'. The historical and theological dimensions of the question: what counts as 'evangelical' does not directly interest me here.

on this or that particular question in the more detailed theological discussion generated by OT. These do not matter here; it is more profitable, I trust, to suggest an agenda for the debate. Five items are suggested here, arising from the discussion but going beyond it. Most of them are, in one respect, loosely connected to the debate, but OT is among those things that should force evangelical attention on the nature of the theological task. In the spirit of the book of Proverbs, there are five, yea six, points made, to the sixth of which I give disproportionate space, and bring us back particularly to theological method in connection with OT.

1. Obviously, the hermeneutical question is important. We need to keep thinking about the relation of systematic theology to the way that biblical Hebrew works and the habits of Greek philosophical enquiry, as they have come down to us in the West. Some of us suspect that much in the systematic enterprise needs to be completely rethought in light of the increasing awareness in the twentieth century of the Jewishness of the entire Christian Scriptures.

2. Has an excessive familiarity with God and language about God, fostered in the pages of journals in philosophical theology, enabled us the more easily to slide into ways of thinking about God that are unworthy and wrong? When God is regularly treated as 'a person' who does this or can not do that, have we led the way into the kind of anthropomorphism that OT embraces, whereby the distance between God and ourselves is reduced?³²

3. What bearing does the problem of evil and suffering, in particular, have on the enterprise of systematic theology? Some of us find the question of theodicy in salient respects intractable. Is this a sign that all-round confidence in a widespread type of systematic construction should be diminished, that we should be content with fewer convictions, but a firmer tenancy upon them?

4. Do we need to practise systematically, in theology, the distinction between rules and moves? In a game (chess, for example) rules are prescribed, but not moves. Systematic theology usually proceeds by constructing the right moves. But should it be more modest, while equally

³² Talk of God as 'a person' regularly risks collision with the trinitarian belief that God is three persons.

rigorous, starting not with moves but rules of theological thought discourse, allowing a diversity of moves within parameters?³³

5. Have we excessively tended to ask how one proposition connects with another proposition on the propositional level, rather than taking our cue from Scripture, where this doctrine or that is tied in to the Christian life, but the doctrines are not necessarily tied in to each other? Should we, therefore, tie them into each other only inasmuch as we tie them into existence; must existence, that is, be the prism through which doctrines pass before they are inter-related? We can tie this question to that of the fusion of systematic and pastoral concerns, mentioned earlier.

6. Finally, is there any role for theological intuitions? If so, what are they supposed to include? Where and when do they kick in? I depicted OT in the way that I did, with virtually no reference to any of its proponents' arguments for their conclusions, and with little counter-argument of my own. This was both in order to highlight the portrayal of God in question, and to engage intuitive responses to it. The word 'intuition' is philosophically loaded, and what we are talking about when we talk about theological intuitions can only be made clear by a proper conceptual analysis. Roughly what I have in mind is this. Exposure to Scripture means that things often strike us as true or untrue, appropriate or inappropriate to say about God, prior to considering the arguments advanced on their behalf. Intuitions presumably grow sounder with increasing immersion in Scripture. They are not independent of what can subsequently be offered in the way of argument, at least they are not necessarily so. And they can be compared with philosophical ones. Intuitions are regularly at the root of the most rigorous philosophical arguments. For if an argument for a proposition fails, by virtue of one false step in a technical maze, what do we characteristically do? Answer: we reformulate the argument. Why? It is because our conviction does not come by argument in the first place, or at least not by the kind of argument that we are now advancing in defence of it. That conviction often has a kind of intuition or a philosophically undemonstrated belief at the root of it. It is fallible, ought to be scrutinised, can be dislodged. But it is there. What should we say of it?

³³ Historically, issues arise here all the way from discussion of fundamental articles in religion to the proposals of George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia, 1984), though we can transplant the problematic out of the particular context in which Lindbeck introduces it.

How should we respond to a scenario like the following? A lad from a non-religious home was jailed for drug offences some time ago and, during his time in the clink, he became a Christian. He was resolved and succeeded in his resolution to put all that behind him. His parents were delighted and looked forward to receiving him back into their home. To their dismay, he told them on his release that he could not return, because Jesus said that we must hate our parents. His parents said that they just didn't know enough about the Bible, or could not interpret it expertly enough, to know what to say about the verse their son had in mind. They were not sure what Jesus meant, but surely he could not have meant that? Intuitively, they felt that there was a misfit between the boy's interpretation and the portrayal of Jesus. Such intuitions are doubtless becoming less common as the post-Christian years roll on, and less trustworthy the longer we live in an intellectual and moral vacuum or free-for-all. Intuitions differ anyway, and may be dead wrong. But will we deny an element of positive significance for biblical interpretation in the responses of the lad's parents? And, *a fortiori*, will we deny it in the Church?

What I have sought to do in this essay is to portray God as he is portrayed by open theists, at least in respect of those things that are controversial, firming up the lines of that portrait, by showing what must be being depicted or being said of God. The weight of my case has been placed on the rhetorical question: 'Are you *really* telling me that you think that this is an evangelically faithful portrayal of God?' But what am I objecting to? It is not to Arminianism, against Calvinism. It is not to ascriptions of temporality or even mutability. Neither am I endorsing, where I am not objecting. Nor am I denying that my objection may entail things in regard to temporality, mutability and related concepts. The objection is to the depiction of a God who *genuinely* has to be *reminded* by Moses of what he had *forgotten* or *overlooked* in his *outrage*; of a God who *genuinely* understood himself less well than did Jonah, at least in one important respect; of a God who *really* got it wrong as regards Suzanne and bitterly reproached himself for that, as I presume that he did. If I am told that my objections on these fronts demonstrate a refusal to take the biblical text at face value, my response is that when I take the biblical text as a whole, I do not see how I can possibly read it as open theists do. Reasons can, of course, be given for this supposition. They not only can, they must, be. But do intuitive resistances count for anything? The God of OT seems to me much as humans are, a super-human, indeed conditioned by our culture, where the portrayal of God which I am compelled to view after reading Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel alongside Genesis and Exodus and the one who 'made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the

knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ' (2 Corinthians 4:6), is not as we are.³⁴ And this seems basic. But is it sheer dogmatic prejudice on my part to think that this is or should be perspicuous?

Gregory Boyd quotes from Major Jones' work, where he says that those in the African tradition 'believe human actions to be truly free' and divine foreknowledge of future free actions incomplete. 'Jones forcefully argues that an African-American experience of oppression has enabled them to seize a dimension of the biblical portrait of God (including the openness of God) that the classical Western tradition missed...'.³⁵ Well, here is an appeal to experience. What is the relation of experience to intuition? Conceptually, they are separable, but are my intuitions about biblical teaching formed out of tacit, unacknowledged experience? Many of us in the West have long learned that our reading of the Bible is prejudiced (as can the reading of the Bible be anywhere else). But does that mean the suspension of intuitions and strict reliance on the outcome of detailed exegesis, hermeneutical deliberation and the exercise of logical deduction? Perhaps – but do we then have nothing in common with philosophers who reformulate arguments because of an undemonstrated conviction that something is right? For agenda purposes, never mind the soundness or errancy of my personal views or intuitions; what epistemic weight, if any, does intuition carry?

An open theist, reading this piece, may find here an expression of hopeless and purblind dogmatism. I hope it neither is, nor is judged to be, that. I hope, rather, that there will be one of two responses. (1) I have mistaken and done injustice to the open theist portrayal of God. I should naturally be glad if this were the case. (2) I have rightly drawn out its bold line, and OT must be rethought, because the portrayal of God in OT is theologically unacceptable. Obviously, there is a third possibility, namely, that I have badly failed to grasp the reality of the living God as revealed to us in Scripture. To that, one can only say that Christian growth in the knowledge of God is growth in knowledge of how far God outstrips our most elevated and highest thoughts of him. That should certainly make us all humble.

³⁴ I can not demonstrate the cultural point here. What is said in OT about love, response, and vulnerability appears to me to echo a widespread experience and perception of what is valuable in human relationships. That does not necessarily make it wrong, for we may have learned to appreciate things which enable us to understand Scripture better. But the question always arises of whether we are imposing on Scripture conceptual connections foreign to the material itself. That if, of course, equally a question for those who oppose OT.

³⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 172, n.3.