

OPEN THEISM'S DOCTRINE OF GOD

*A Critical Review of Five Books on the Subject.
a.k.a. the pathway to disillusionment with Evangelical debating etiquette.*

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INTRODUCTION

On the surface at least the practical implications of the open theism (a.k.a. the Open View of God) seem quite innocuous. The idea that God could change his mind about something seems reasonable, He is God after all. The idea that God actually listens to our prayer and acts accordingly through answering is pretty much how most Christians would see prayer working. The idea that God may not know what we are about to do seems to be quirky but certainly not offensive. Who would have thought that basic tenets of the doctrine of God presented by the book *The Openness of God* would stir up a hornets nest of debate?

Fundamentally, the debate concerns finding a resolution to a tension inherent in God's nature—the tension between his mysterious perfections and his revealed relationality. Often we find the discussion revolves around God's temporality because relationality implies he is in sync with us even though his perfections imply he is 'other' than any human construct, including time and space. It is suggested by the open theists that theologians have fallen into setting transcendence against immanence as the *modus operandi* for God's interaction with His creation.¹

In contrast, the open theists argue that "love is the concrete reality that unifies all the attributes of God"² and conclude that love is dynamic not static³ so much so that he "risked suffering when he decided to love and be loved."⁴ Love is the "first and the last word in the biblical portrait of God."⁵ Contrast this with Bruce Ware's conclusion that open theism undermines

. . . the uncontested deity of God, his absolute lordship over all space and time, his universal, unrivalled and inviolable sovereignty, his flawlessly wise and

¹ ". . . theologians usually place the preponderance of their emphasis on God's transcendence." Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness, Didsbury Lectures; 2000* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Paternoster Press; Baker Academic, 2001), 105.

² Richard Rice, "Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 21.

³ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 104.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁵ Clark H. Pinnock, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 18.

meticulous providence, his undiminished and infinite perfection and his majestic and incomparable glory . . .⁶

Both sides of the argument are committed to lofty ideals about God that are difficult to define⁷, but at least the idea of Divine Love is something we can all connect with at some level.

This essay covers the argument from the perspective of five books namely : Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God : A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*; Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible*; Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory : The Diminished God of Open Theism*; Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover : A Theology of God's Openness*; and John Piper et al., *Beyond the Bounds : Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*. In the process I will endeavour in a short space to critique the value of each of the authors' contributions to the discussion (I cannot cover all the essays, but I will cover those whom I think are the most salient).

The first book of the five and the one that introduced the debate into late 20th century mainstream evangelicalism, is the compendium *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. The introduction outlines the purpose of the book and ends with:

We pray that this book will foster a passion for God, enable us to understand better how God relates to us, and lead God's people to glorify God.⁸

This is a view that is shared by all five books, at least in theory but not necessarily in practice. The arguments often exhibit the latent feelings of rage from the debaters that have escalated proportionately to their polarisation from each other. It is unfortunate, though perhaps inevitable, that the debate is tainted with such emotiveness.

From my perspective it can be seen that one side of the debate is asking important questions, the other is simply threatened and wants to shut those questions up.⁹

⁶ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory : The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2000), 229.

⁷ How can we really ascribe infinite perfection when we have no notion of either infinity or perfection? How do we explain divine sovereignty? I concede that we can only talk about God in absolute terms, but it takes courage to claim to absolutely know truth when that truth is defined by vague terms.

⁸ Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, 10.

ARGUMENTS PRESENTED

Since *The Openness of God* began the discussion in recent times there has been a significant amount of heated discussion take place in the ensuing years. In Pinnock's latest book, *Most Moved Mover*, he states how he "would prefer a sweeter spirit from some of critics . . ." ¹⁰ This is not surprising when you read the last chapter of Bruce Ware's book, *God's lesser Glory*, where Ware strays from critique and into what appears to be self gratifying and emotionally charged 'cleverness'. ¹¹ John Piper feeds the fire by saying that "Open Theism as theologically ruinous, dishonouring to God, belittling to Christ, and pastorally hurtful." He concedes that the open theist camp is not setting out to do this but as defender of the truth he states, "intentions of the heart are not my concern here. ¹²" He is then bold enough to assert

. . . wrong thinking about God leads to wrong believing. And wrong believing leads to the weakening of moral and spiritual life, and finally to condemnation. ¹³

It's a nice theory, but in practice it denies the power of God to act in peoples' lives because faith is a work in progress. No-one can admit to having right-believing when

⁹ John Piper's final chapter in *Beyond the Bounds* is riddled with both strong and weak arguments. If there were no threat, then I would think that the strong arguments would suffice but introducing arguments like "to say we that we all worship and omniscient God would be evacuated of common meaning," because the traditional understanding and the Open Theist understanding are "radically different views" and therefore compromise the unity of the 'historic' church is trite. By the same token, what people understood of sovereignty 300 years ago compared with now are radically different—we do not fear the sovereignty of the Queen of England, we mock her in our tabloid newspapers.

Different perspectives on divine attributes are inherent in every Christian. There is no consistent theology, there may be common points of reference, but they are all to some extent radically different interpretations of the same thing. We can tell when something is way off-base, but it is impossible to say we know *exactly* where orthodoxy ends and heterodoxy begins. I can't help but feel that Piper is getting a little carried away with his crusade. John Piper, "Grounds for Dismay : The Error and Injury of Open Theism," in *Beyond the Bounds : Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 371.

¹⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, xi.

¹¹ So much so that at times I wonder if he is defending the sovereignty of God or trying to gain a reputation.

¹² Piper, *Beyond the Bounds*, 371.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 376.

they start their Christian journey. His polemic is not necessarily helpful for the discussion.

At the end of reading *Beyond the Bounds* I felt as though the whole book had been hurriedly thrown together for the single purpose of establishing open theism as being a heresy, which given the thrust of the last two chapters, was in fact correct.

Nevertheless, we have to at least admit that the arguments offered by either side are both comprehensive and compelling. Following is a brief overview of the general thrust of the arguments.

HERMENEUTIC

Both sides want to underpin themselves with the strong Evangelical ethic of the Sufficiency of Scripture as God's revelation. Laudable as this is, the ethic is too idealistic to be pragmatically workable as it still employs the unavoidable (and often maligned) subjective interpretation because scripture, inspired that it is, is still language. As far as I can tell, well at least in these five books anyway, open theism seems to be the only position that seems to accept the inevitably subjective hermeneutic that we all carry to our interpretation of scripture. This is an important distinction, the idea that we "know in part,"¹⁴ credits Pinnock's position as being open to discussion. There are significant difficulties on both sides of the argument and neither side provide simple answers; they are both left with significant areas untrimmed by Occam's razor, and so inevitably give into over-complicated explanations for their difficult texts.

There are no clear answers as to what a pure yet pragmatic hermeneutic might be, but surely acknowledging the contribution of external influence as one approaches sacred text is sensible. Pinnock openly states that he uses a 'trilateral, scripturally centred approach' where the corners are experience, reason and tradition,¹⁵ so at least *he* admits how these kaleidoscopically affect any formulation of scripturally based dogma. Here lies the greatest weakness of the opponents. They more or less expect that the reader understands, if not completely buys into, their hermeneutic method, while they never actually state exactly what that is.

¹⁴ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, ix.

¹⁵ "First, as an evangelical my primary commitment is to scripture not to tradition, reason or experience." *Ibid.*, 19.

In their critique, opponents of open theism¹⁶ generally do not seem to appreciate Pinnock's broad brush, 'big picture' and narrative approach to scripture¹⁷ and instead use a more systematic, 'tried and tested,' proof-text method. But, if evangelicalism is to be truly faithful to Scripture, it must consider both the context within which Scripture was revealed and also the context from which Scripture is read—the Reformation was after all born out of reading scripture *against* tradition. Pinnock's conclusion to *Most Moved Mover* dwells on this point of theological difference where he states,

A tension, which manifests itself here, exists between scholasticism and pietism in the evangelical movement. From a pietistic point of view, where doctrinal precision is not everything, a measure of theological pluralism is possible, such that an amicable dialogue between the open view of God and other models is possible. However, from the standpoint of a more scholastic orientation, where doctrinal exactness is more highly prized, dialogue, if it occurs at all, is often testy and the toleration of differences much more difficult.¹⁸

Indeed, it appears that this is not so much a struggle about the doctrine of God, but about hermeneutical method.

THE STICKY BIT: ANTHROPOPATHISMS

It is ironic that what could be seen as, in my view, the strongest essay in *Beyond the Bounds* seems to undermine the book's implicit purpose to discredit open theism. In it, A.B. Caneday admits that we need to be more careful with how we interpret anthropomorphisms, especially the pathematic metaphors.¹⁹ He suggests that the very nature of revelation about God cannot be anything other than analogical.²⁰ The

¹⁶ And these are to be understood in this essay as those who give their views in the five books

¹⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 20.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁹ "Whether we classical Christian theists or open theists, we need to return to the Bible. We must all confess that the Enlightenment has influenced us more deeply than we may want to admit. . . . all God's revelation is analogical. If we are to read the Bible correctly, then, our minds need training to retain the proper reference point when thinking about God." A. B. Caneday, "Veiled Glory : God's Self-Revelation in Human Likeness—a Biblical Theology of God's Anthropomorphic Self-Disclosure," in *Beyond the Bounds : Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 198–9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

implications of this are profound whichever standpoint you adopt. Why this undermines the rest of the book is because it acknowledges that there are grey areas here, that interpretation must take place, and because we are interpreting metaphor and poetry then we are straying into a thoroughly subjective arena. Caneday demonstrates beautifully just how unscientific our approach to scripture often needs to be.

Most of the scriptural arguments of this debate revolve around the interpretation of anthropopathisms. There seems to be little debate that analogy is the only way we can understand God since in one sense it is the only manner in which She is revealed, but there is sharp disagreement as to how far we can extend the analogues—how much can we understand God through from anthropopathism and anthropomorphism?

The physical attributes of God don't seem to present much of an issue since He is after all spirit, so whether He has a body or not is speculation, but it is clearly useful to understand His interaction with us through him extending His arm,²¹ or as a potter,²² or any number of other visual impressions. These are not contentious in the debate. Rather the disagreements focus on the pathematic metaphors expressed in the scriptures. God changes her mind²³, is pleased²⁴, is angry²⁵, is sorry²⁶—these are emotions that challenge the idea of impassibility and omniscience.

This is the key—why did God say that He 'repented' (Jon 3:10) if that's not what He actually did? It is all very well to say that this is anthropopathic language that needs interpreting, but we need to consider why scripture was inspired to say 'repent' instead of something else. Inspiration implies that if a word's actual meaning is not to be taken, then it is at least the best key to understanding what actually happened.

Why did the bible say God "repented" instead of simply saying that "So God then did this" if that is closer to the truth?

Ware offers the following framework where,

²¹ e.g. Exodus 6:6

²² e.g. Isaiah 64:8

²³ e.g. The narrative lends itself to this interpretation, 2 Kings 20:1–6

²⁴ e.g. Numbers 24:1, 1 Samuel 12:22

²⁵ e.g. Numbers 11:10, Deuteronomy 1:37; 3:26; 4:21; 9:8; 9:20

²⁶ e.g. Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:35

“A given ascription to God may rightly be understood as anthropomorphic when Scripture clearly presents God as transcending the very human or finite features it elsewhere attributes to him.”²⁷

But the irony behind this is that it becomes meaningless since there can be no starting point for knowing God’s character in the first place.

If all scripture is analogous, then which analogue is the starting point? At some point a presumption must be made by the interpreter that a particular analogue has more weight than another. How is that established?

Ware further adds that God can “*experience internally and express outwardly* appropriate moral responses to these changed situations *when they occur in history*.”²⁸ The open view is in complete agreement here but for one important distinction. Where Ware thinks God is responding to the events of foreknown track of history, open theists see God is responding simply to events. I am drawn to open theism here because it leaves God as being non-subservient to history and future.

Boyd approaches the metaphors with a more literalist approach suggesting that the classical position is inconsistent in its hermeneutic.²⁹ Richard Rice³⁰ and Pinnock however consider that literalism is crass.³¹

“We need to avoid both literalism and agnosticism. The way forward is to work with the diversity of metaphors and follow the grain of them.”³²

And follow the grain they have—well the grain they can see anyway. The point still stands that we cannot make God in our image, they concede that anthropomorphisms are analogue. As Rice says:

²⁷ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

²⁹ “The open view is rooted in the conviction that the passages that constitute the motif of future openness should be taken just as literally as the passages that constitute the motif of future determinism.” Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 54.

³⁰ “In spite of the straightforward assertion that God changed his mind (“repented” or “relented”), biblical commentators often go to great lengths to explain that this is not what occurred.” Rice, *The Openness of God*, 27.

³¹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 61.

³² *Ibid.*, 62.

“So the open view of God draws some important parallels between divine and human experience, but it does not by any means equate the two.”³³

A God who repents doesn’t correlate at all well with a God who has exhaustive definite foreknowledge. But Ware adds little to the text when he says that in

“no cases of the divine repentance is it necessary to go further than this and say that God *learned* something new *by* this changed situation. Rather these expressions of repentance may indicate more narrowly that God was aware of what had changed and chose to act in accordance with this new situation.”³⁴

Ware then goes on to unfairly oversimplify an openness interpretation by crassly applying their ‘plain reading’ hermeneutic to various other scriptures. After demonstrating how it doesn’t work on some and so ‘discrediting’ their approach, he then goes on to use the same technique later on.³⁵

At least Caneday acknowledges that the open theist’s challenge to interpreting anthropomorphism is valid but adds that it needs more consistency.³⁶ (Incidentally, his contribution made an fairly average book worth buying.)

³³ Rice, *The Openness of God*, 42.

³⁴ Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory*, 90–1.

³⁵ His treatment of Isaiah 41:21–29 is questionable. He picks out some verses here at the expense of others to construct a case for exhaustive divine foreknowledge being the defining attribute of God’s deity. Where he says that exhaustive divine foreknowledge “is a test of true deity.”

My issue is this. While the passage is talking about the uniqueness of God, its context is more about demonstrating exactly how God is different to idols. It is not so much about proving certain things about God, rather it is polemic describing how there really is no contest. Ware skips out verses that deal with God “knowing former events” since this isn’t really a distinctive characteristic of deity though it is still part of Isaiah’s argument since it shows that idols have no knowledge whatsoever. Isaiah also points out that idols cannot “do good or evil”.

The thrust of the passage is to contrast the impotence of blocks of wood with an omnipotent God. Sure it includes knowledge of the future, but it is using language as vague as horoscopes. The predictions are general enough to be assimilated within the open view. Nothing in Deutero Isaiah is specific enough to be classified as fortune-telling, rather God will bring about the future according to his general plans. This is what the open theists would consider as the “partly settled” future. Ware has effectively used a couple of verses to construct a test of deity being exhaustive divine foreknowledge, at the expense of the Biblical argument that deals with contrasting the personhood of God with hunks of wood and the obvious idiocy involved in worshipping the latter. *Ibid.*, 113-19.

³⁶ He illustrates where Sanders is inconsistent. Caneday, *Beyond the Bounds*, 152–56.

Anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language leaves us as the interpreters where we are left with trying to understand what it means. The inspiration of Scripture allows us to accept that the analogues employed are the closed representation of what actually happened. We cannot just go redefining words to suit our different constructs—we need to resist the temptation to cash in, for the sake of preconceived ideas of truth, on the inherent inadequacy of language to communicate purely.

PHILOSOPHICAL

Why is there a prejudice to favour one analogue over the other? The open theists suggest that it is because the traditional model of God (classical theism) is the result of a sophisticated hybrid of Scripture and Hellenistic thought.

In *The Openness of God*, John Sanders gives an excellent summary of the what he sees as not just the Hellenisation of Christianity but the Christianisation of Hellenism.³⁷ He moves through the philosophies held about God from Thales, who was on a quest to find the overarching metaphysic principle, to Parmenides who introduced the idea of “the One” who was imperishable and timeless³⁸. He then summarises Plato’s contribution where “God must be immutable, for if he changed he would no longer be perfect”³⁹; Aristotle with his notion of the unmoved mover that must be the “. . . first cause on which all other motion depends”⁴⁰; the Stoic idea where “if a tragic event happens to you, you should not necessarily consider it a “good” for you individually, but it is certainly good for the universe as a whole.”⁴¹ His conclusion of what we have imported:

. . . change and time denoted weakness and corruption while immutability and timelessness represented strength, immortality and perfection.⁴²

Boyd doesn’t concern himself with an outlining the Hellenistic philosophical influence on Classical theism, instead he weaves his suspicions about this into the rest

³⁷ John Sanders, "Historical Considerations," in *The Openness of God : A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 60.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 61–2.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 68.

of his text.⁴³ Pinnock, on the other hand, devotes a whole chapter to “Overcoming a Pagan Inheritance.”⁴⁴ He expresses how now theologians are starting to trust “their intuitions concerning what God must be like.”⁴⁵ He suggests that in assuming that God is a ‘perfect’ being we are forced to construct what we think perfect may be, and often resort to ideas entrenched in what we have inherited from classical theism.⁴⁶

Both Sanders and Pinnock chart the development of a Christian-Hellenist hybrid system through to the Reformation. The bitter irony according to Pinnock is that our conclusions leave us where “in humanity we consider sins are . . . posited as God’s attributes!”⁴⁷ He also cautions us

“Syncretism is not always a bad thing but there are always dangers.”⁴⁸

William Hasker observes that for “us moderns, this preference for permanence over change is scarcely compelling.”⁴⁹

As an alternative they suggest that in their model and according to scripture, God doesn’t seem to be uninvolved with the world. He is not static, He is temporal and most contentiously He changes his mind about certain things⁵⁰. The arguments centre around the notion that the primary perfection of God is love.⁵¹

⁴³ e.g. “If we do not read into this material a philosophical preconception about what God must be like, we have no problem affirming this motif of future openness alongside the motif of future determinism.” Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 87.

⁴⁴ In his opening paragraph his intentions are clear: “A package of divine attributes has been constructed which leans in the direction of immobility and hyper-transcendence, particularly because of the influence of the Hellenistic category of unchangeableness.” Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 65.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁴⁶ William Hasker, “A Philosophical Perspective,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 132.

⁴⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 74.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁹ Hasker, *The Openness of God*, 129.

⁵⁰ “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 . . . and on it goes. God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals. . . . God does not control everything that happens. . . . In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being.” Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 7.

⁵¹ “. . . love is the most important quality we attribute to God, and love is more than care and commitment; it involves being sensitive and responsive as well.” Rice, *The Openness of God*, 15.

God through the lens of open theism is personable, emotional, accessible, interactive and vulnerable. Love involves risk. Love without risk is not actually love instead it is a relationship of mechanical stimulus and response. Risk comes from true libertarian freedom which is central to their understanding of our relationship with God and how He created us. God has given us permission to be truly free and as part of His love he interacts with us in temporal give and take. In the open theistic position the concept of God's love for us is totally accessible.

But, Mark R. Talbot contests that the loving relationship that we enter into with God does not necessitate risk, that it is possible for "real love to act without the beloved's consent."⁵² But most strikingly, by using the Trinitarian argument against them, he asks how risk fits into the perfect love of the Trinity—a very good point that needs to be adequately answered. But his arguments still leave an unnecessary distance between God and creature. Ultimately the love he ascribes as God's is perhaps too pure to be recognisable by us mere mortals.

The main rebuttal presented in *Beyond the Bounds* to the suggested philosophical journey concerning the doctrine of God, is disappointing and longwinded. Chad Owen Brand⁵³ tries to put the shoe on the other foot by asking what philosophical influences Pinnock et al. are aware of. How much has open theism been shaped by the philosophical climate we are in? But at the end of his essay, all we have established is that every theological paradigm is influenced by concurrent philosophical currents⁵⁴ (it is interesting to note that Brand doesn't question the philosophical influences

⁵² He uses the example of helping his wife who may be in a coma. She cannot consent to his help, but his love necessitates that he does. The weakness in his argument is that in a comatose state it could be argued that his wife would have no free will for him to transgress. Mark Talbot, "True Freedom : The Liberty That Scripture Portrays as Worth Having," in *Beyond the Bounds : Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 108.

⁵³ Chad Owen Brand, "Genetic Defects or Accidental Similarities? Orthodoxy and Open Theism and Their Connections to Western Philosophical Traditions," in *Beyond the Bounds : Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 43–73.

⁵⁴ Through a rather lengthy discussion about Carl Henry's theology, Brand tries to draw an analogue for us all by letting us see that in the same way that Henry was influenced by philosophy, so was Augustine, Clark and Boyd. This was never up for dispute. If anything he has strengthened the

underpinning John Piper's reformed position). Brand also compares open theism with other heresies that have Hellenistic roots which is fair, but it is not news to Pinnock who gives an account of the historic links of open theism in *Most Moved Mover*.⁵⁵ The issue is not *that* there is Hellenistic philosophical influence, but rather, how much this influence has guided our interpretation of scripture.

There is no doubt in my mind that philosophy always plays a part when developing any systematic theology, it's unavoidable, it is a strength of the open theist's that they factor it in to their schema from the beginning.

EXHAUSTIVE DEFINITE FOREKNOWLEDGE AND PRESENTISM

Another contentious aspect of this debate is this very question about presentism i.e. the partly settled and partly unsettled nature of the future.⁵⁶ The traditional understanding of God's foreknowledge where He knows all that will happen and in fact ordains it as such, is challenged as a classical synthesis of the Platonic perfection of omniscience where God knows *everything absolutely*. Open theists argue that there is no sustainable basis for this claim from the narrative undercurrents of scripture.

Ware considers this as "the basis for all lines of difference"⁵⁷ between an openness view and any other classical tradition. If God does not know exactly what will happen

stance of his opposition who readily admit to philosophical influence. His final conclusion looks like it was designed to be clever but in my opinion falls flat:

"I appreciate open theism in at least one way. Pinnock, Boyd, Sanders, and the others who are pursuing this project will stand there as reminders to the rest of us how important it is not to subjugate our theology to alien thought forms, whether Hellenistic, Teutonic, or Anglo-American. They will shake their fingers at us and tell us, "Don't go that route." At the same time, though, they serve as exemplars of just what happens when we allow our theology to be taken captive by alien thought forms. I'd like to say to them, "You should not go that route, either." Ibid., 73.

⁵⁵ He effectively disarms his critics by making it quite clear that because open theism resembles one particular aspect of Socinianism it doesn't mean that they are in fact Socinian as has been charged. The Socinians had no Trinitarian theology which is fundamental to evangelicalism and open theism. Also, by the same argument it is possible to authenticate open theism as orthodox precisely because it is Trinitarian. One resemblance doesn't constitute the argument. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 105–07.

⁵⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 23.; Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 13, 100.

⁵⁷ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 65.

to us in the future then how do we understand theodicy, prophecy and even what it means to trust God?

He uses the idea that God having knowledge of the future is *the* defining attribute of divinity an idea we have discussed earlier.⁵⁸ He also rejects the open theist middle position of God knowing the future in part⁵⁹ and being able to accomplish ‘big picture’ events in the future. He does raise some significant questions for the open theists by asking, exactly how does God achieve big picture events without some kind of coercion of supposedly libertarianly⁶⁰ free creatures?

And this is the crunch. The most difficult hurdle for open theism to overcome is how they explain the knowledge of future events that God has told the prophets, or more specifically Jesus’ prediction of Peter’s denial. Just how did Jesus know that Peter would deny him *three* times? Prophecy is the weakest line of defence for open theism.

This text difficult to dismiss because it forms an important part of the gospel narrative. It is not readily relocated in any literary genre that can have multiple meanings as we find in Psalms (that often employ hyperbole), or in prophetic writing that can be hermeneutically sidestepped. It is narrative which is a particularly favourite genre for the hermeneutic of open theism.

It is a difficult text. The prophecy concerning Peter’s denial is an actual undeniable foretelling act. Pinnock does not address this text in *Most Moved Mover* and Rice ignores it in his otherwise reasonably comprehensive section on scriptural foundations in *The Openness of God*. This leaves Boyd who presents a fairly weak argument where the accuracy of the prediction is because of Jesus’ absolute knowledge of Peter’s character.⁶¹

⁵⁸ “God’s designated authenticating sign of his deity is the reality and truthfulness of his foreknowledge. To diminish this reality or to qualify its truthfulness is to make a mockery of God and the stated purpose for his futuristic declarations.” Ibid., 119.

⁵⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 51.; Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 81.

⁶⁰ I really didn’t think this was a word until I found it on the Evangelical Theological Society’s website in a letter from Terry Thieson, <http://www.etsjets.org/members/challenge/members/tiessen-terry.html>

⁶¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 35-37.

While I share Ware's concern over the weakness of this argument, I would resist stating this concern so emotively.⁶² The open theists have not solved it. Paul Helseth therefore contends "that it undermines the coherence of [the open theist's] program."⁶³ The argument he presents is compelling, but he overextends himself when he expects that his argument demonstrates "the utter untrustworthiness of the God of open theism."⁶⁴ Why would he come to this conclusion without answering the apparent untrustworthiness of God with certain other scriptures?⁶⁵

While Peter's denial does not sit at all comfortably with the open theist position, there are equally problematic scriptures for the classical theists. For example, the explanation by Ware about Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is also weak.⁶⁶ Yes, Peter's denial is a difficult text, but this doesn't undermine open theism's entire scriptural foundation. It is perhaps a strength of *Most Moved Mover* that Pinnock doesn't seem to need to address this one particular text as it would distract readers away from the undeniably huge amount of support that he has found elsewhere in the biblical narrative.

There are difficult texts on either side of the debate, but in the same way we cannot use one verse to support a theological positions we cannot undermine a complete system either.

⁶² "Honestly, I am simply incredulous that the proposal that the proposal would be seriously made that *Peter would deny him three times*, based on God's perfect knowledge of Peter's character." Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 128.

⁶³ Paul Kjoss Helseth, "The Trustworthiness of God and the Foundation of Hope," in *Beyond the Bounds : Open Theism and the Undermining of Biblical Christianity*, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 293.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁶⁵ For example, Why did God instruct Jonah to lie to Nineveh if He knew all along they would repent. Or, how could we trust a God with as much confusion and self doubt as displayed in the Garden of Gethsemane? Why would Jesus even ask the question that the cup be taken away? (Matt. 26:36–45)

⁶⁶ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 74.

Quite possibly the strongest arguments put forward for the open theist position is that even if we don't subscribe to this in any formal sense, most people live like this. Most people pray as if it will make a difference.⁶⁷ Boyd expresses it like this:

It is the only view that allows us to affirm that the way things *appear* is basically the way things actually *are* . . . the open view is also the only view that reflects the way we actually live.⁶⁸

Trying to make sense of how we interact with God in any meaningful way is quest of our faith. They suggest that this breaths life and vitality into people's faith.⁶⁹

An important contribution for open theism is in the area of theodicy. According to Pinnock, God is not the cause of our suffering, though he "is always alongside, helping us through."⁷⁰ Boyd accepts that the open view doesn't create an airtight theodicy, but does see that it makes a valuable contribution to releasing God from being the author of evil as it shifts the responsibility onto his creatures.⁷¹

There is an interesting essay that centres around theodicy in *Beyond the Bounds* where Mark Talbot argues against Open Theism's formulation on the problem of evil and makes statements like

. . . *nothing* happens to us—nothing good *and nothing bad*—that does not ultimately come from God's hand.⁷²

He and John Sanders share tragedy as being a major influence in their adoption or rejection of open theism. Talbot concedes that this is a huge statement to make, but stands by it anyway, citing the often quoted Romans 8:28–29 and Psalm 30:4–5 and then appealing to mystery. Ware is brave enough to say that "there is no pointless suffering. God works *everything* for [the believers'] good."⁷³ It is my experience that this

⁶⁷ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 154.

⁶⁸ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 90.

⁶⁹ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 154.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁷¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 99.

⁷² Talbot, *Beyond the Bounds*, 96.

⁷³ Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 193. This seems like a vacuous claim in light of the fact that we always interpret God's good work in hindsight. I'm sure we cannot challenge Ware on this because he will find anything that is good in any situation (for believers) or appeal to mystery.

pastoral counsel falls flat, even though they cite examples that would state otherwise.⁷⁴ I know at least with the uncertainty of why events happen that instead of trying to discover the ‘good’ that will come out of tragedy, I will spend time grieving over pointlessness of waste.

The proposed theodicy under open theism is so much more palatable. While the problem of evil is not resolved, open theism allows us to let God participate in our suffering, to share in our suffering and to guide us through it into healing.

CONCLUSION

The universe is made up of huge distances. It is for many astronomers infinite. 3000 years ago the Mesopotamian cosmology thought that we were encased in a bubble inside water, that the heavens were a dome with the stars, sun and moon traversing it. We used to think that ‘as high as the heavens’ was pretty darn high. As we gained knowledge of the universe, that definition has been superseded. Distance has become meaningless to us. Astronomers don’t measure distance in terms of meters or kilometres, but in terms of light years. We can’t even begin to comprehend exactly how far a light year is, no-one has travelled one yet. All we know is that it is big. Has the universe changed while we discovered it’s enormity? Not at all, but our understanding of the universe has changed radically. We haven’t really any understanding of what the ancients may have understood by the concept of infinity, but we do know that our understanding has more depth.

In this discussion about the nature of God we are finding that we may need to redefine previously held beliefs about him. We don’t necessarily have a deep understanding of perfection, but maybe, just maybe open theism is offering us a deeper understanding. Omniscience is arbitrary and vague—we think may we know what it is, but it is abstract and perhaps that’s why we want to pin it on God.

Our theological method constrains us to abstraction and what the open theists are attempting is to bring the relationship back from the abstract and into the tangible. And when we do that, we hear accusations of making God in our image. Sure, making God in our image is dangerous, but making God in our not-image is equally so. I

⁷⁴ Piper, *Beyond the Bounds*, 383-4.

would prefer the former because at least there are clues in us as to the nature of God precisely because we do reflect *imago Dei*.

The perfections of God are so mysterious that they need to be open to question. Why? Because God broke through these perfections through Jesus Christ. When Jesus walked this earth he was perfect, but not in the classical view. If Plato is right, that God is perfect and, if perfect, “can only change for the worse”,⁷⁵ then what are we to make of the incarnation? Jesus was not abstract, he was tangible—if Jesus wasn’t a change then what is? When we engage with the biblical story theology becomes tangible. And as theological as we would like Jesus to be, he shows how God enters our story of existence, both then and now. It is no surprise that the strongest arguments for open theism come from narrative rather than didactic portions of the bible, whereas the opposite is true for the Classicalists.

In the choice of these books the argument looks very two dimensional. One side is raising the questions, the other is threatened by the questions and is rising to mount a massive defence. I have difficulty understanding how people are pragmatically, as opposed to theologically, threatened by God not knowing the future, how they regard God as being less because he is not in any familiar theological system. Isn’t it fair to say that the God that Moses knew looks radically different to the God of Augustine, Calvin, Ware, Piper or Pinnock?

Isn’t this the whole point of our theocentric perspective of history : that God is a mystery and both sides are trying to make a route into that mystery, but perhaps instead of being in wonder of the possibilities and resilience that lies within that mystery, some on either side are resorting to formulating dogma and constructing photo essays that tell only part of the truth. We can only ever be journalists whenever we try to document God’s mystery. At the very least we should admit that.

⁷⁵ Sanders, *The Openness of God*, 63.

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