

INSPIRATION AS A TEST CASE FOR MODELS OF PROVIDENCE

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## INSPIRATION AS A TEST CASE FOR MODELS OF PROVIDENCE

At the end of his essay on the doctrine of Scripture, Graham Cole contends, “The doctrine of Scripture, I would argue, may usefully be located within the doctrine of special providence. It is a crucial element in God’s provision for his people, their preservation and government.”<sup>1</sup> As Herman Bavinck rightly observes, “Scripture in its totality is itself the book of God’s providence.”<sup>2</sup> Scripture is one way that God has provided for his people, and the manner in which he has given us Scripture is an example of how he governs all things.

Though inspiration is an important aspect of divine providence, most philosophers of religion, and even many theologians, do not connect these two doctrines. While some theologians who write about the inspiration of the Bible mention providence in passing, few philosophers who write about providence discuss the inspiration of the Bible. To paraphrase the Lord, what God has joined together, let not philosophical theologians separate.

In this paper, I suggest that these two doctrines should be examined together. More specifically, I suggest that the doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible should be used as a way to test models of divine providence. If a model of providence, held consistently, cannot adequately explain the inspiration of Scripture, then that model should be abandoned in favor of one that can. I conclude that theological determinism best explains the inspiration of the Bible.

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<sup>1</sup> Graham A. Cole, “Why a Book? Why This Book? Why the Particular Order within This Book? Some Theological Reflections on the Canon,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 466n28.

<sup>2</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 2:595. In context, Bavinck means that the Bible tells of God’s providential activity through history. However, it is also true that the Bible is one particular result of God’s providence.

## Definitions

Before I proceed, I will define a few terms. When I refer to divine providence, I have in mind God's relationship to the world that he has created. As Bavinck defines it, "providence is that act of God by which from moment to moment he preserves and governs all things."<sup>3</sup> Exactly how, or to what extent, God governs all things is debated.

As for inspiration, D. A. Carson provides a typical definition of that term: "Inspiration is normally defined (at least in Protestant circles) as that supernatural work of God's Holy Spirit upon the human authors of Scripture such that what they wrote was precisely what God intended them to write in order to communicate his truth."<sup>4</sup> When Christians say that God inspired the Bible, they mean that God is the ultimate author of the Bible, and that he wrote it through human authors. Thus, as John Feinberg claims, "the Scriptures were written using dual authorship. This kind of inspiration is sometimes called concursive inspiration."<sup>5</sup> As we will see in the next section, this understanding of inspiration accurately represents the biblical data.

Finally, when referring to the Bible or Scripture, I refer to the contents of the Protestant canon, the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. Those who accept the so-called deuterocanonical books will have to decide for themselves whether what I present here might apply to their Bible.

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<sup>3</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:596.

<sup>4</sup> D. A. Carson, "Approaching the Bible," in *Selected Writings on Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 31. Matthew Barrett, in *God's Word Alone: The Authority of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 229, gives a similar definition, adding that God preserved "each author's writing style and personality."

<sup>5</sup> John S. Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 202. He stresses that the work of God and the human authors of Scripture was simultaneous, which is, of course, different from the way that two humans might coauthor a book.

## How Did God Give Us the Bible?

We can imagine many logically possible ways whereby God could have used human beings to produce his written word. However, any Christian doctrine of providence must be able to explain how God *actually* gave us the Bible, not how he *could have* given us the Bible. To know how God gave us the Bible, we must rely on divine revelation. We cannot fully comprehend God's providence through independent reasoning or observation. Thus, we must look to what the Bible says about its origins.

The biblical data support five statements, each of which must be accounted for by an acceptable model of providence. These statements will serve as criteria by which models of providence will be evaluated.

Let us call the first statement the “God-breathed criterion”: God “breathed” out all Scripture by means of the Holy Spirit, who caused the Bible’s authors to write what God wanted them to write. The Holy Spirit spoke through them, and they wrote “in the Spirit.” This close relationship between divine and human activity in the writing of Scripture is best described as concursive.<sup>6</sup> Many texts support this statement. The most prominent is 2 Timothy 3:16, which says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God.”<sup>7</sup> Paul has in mind the Old Testament Scriptures, which Timothy would have available to him.<sup>8</sup> However, it is possible that Paul might also regard

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<sup>6</sup> This premise could be supported by the fact that some arguments in the New Testament regarding Old Testament Scripture seem to rest upon the meaning of a single word, such as in Matt 22:31–32, or the wording of a single sentence, as in Matt 22:41–46. Since such details matter, it is important to acknowledge the verbal plenary inspiration of the Bible, something ensured by the activity of the Holy Spirit.

<sup>7</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV). While certain translations refer to “inspiration,” the better translation of the Greek word in question, θεόπνευστος, is “God-breathed.” This compound word is formed from the Greek words for “God” and “to breathe” (θεός, πνειν). See William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2000), 566.

<sup>8</sup> I assume that Paul and Peter wrote the letters that bear their names, despite many attempts to suggest that some letters of the New Testament were written pseudonymously. Readers interested in this matter can consult the following works: Donald Guthrie, “Epistolary Pseudepigraphy,” in *New Testament Introduction*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1011–28; Michael J. Kruger, “The Authenticity of 2 Peter,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 42, no. 4 (December 1999): 645–671; Terry L. Wilder, “Does the Bible Contain

the New Testament documents as being “God-breathed” as well.<sup>9</sup> The apostle Peter also recognized both the Old and New Testaments as Scripture.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, if all Scripture is breathed out by God, such that it is his word, and “Scripture” can apply to both the Old and New Testaments, then it seems clear enough that the entire Bible is God-breathed.

The reference to breath is, at the least, a reference to God’s act of creating Scripture. But it seems also to be a reference to the Holy Spirit. According to Henri Blocher, “The Spirit is the Breath in which the Word is uttered.” Just as the Incarnate Word was conceived by the power of the Spirit in the Virgin Mary, so God’s written word was produced by the Spirit through human authors.<sup>11</sup>

Other passages explicitly mention the role of the Holy Spirit in inspiration. The most important of these passages is 2 Peter 1:21, which states that “no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” Many theologians believe that “prophecy” here refers to the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> If so, Peter tells us that all Scripture was generated through the same process of the Holy Spirit “carrying along” the men who wrote Scripture. The Greek verb translated as “carried along,” φέρειν, often is used to refer to wind that propelled ships, as in Acts 27:15, 17.<sup>13</sup> Feinberg explains the meaning of this verse:

Even as a sailing ship must rely on the wind to move it, so the human authors of Scripture depended on the Holy Spirit’s action to write the words of Scripture. Just as the ship

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Forgeries?” in *In Defense of the Bible: A Comprehensive Apologetic for the Authority of Scripture*, ed. Steven B. Cowan and Terry L. Wilder (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 126; Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 564–68. In 1 Timothy 5:18, Paul refers to “Scripture” when quoting both Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7. Clearly, Paul was willing to put Luke’s Gospel and the Law in the same category.

<sup>10</sup> Peter recognized that Jesus spoke through the apostles in a way that God spoke through the “holy prophets” of the Old Testament (2 Pet 3:2). He was also willing to place Paul’s letters in the same category as “the other Scriptures” (2 Pet 3:15–16).

<sup>11</sup> Henri Blocher, “God and the Scripture Writers: The Question of Double Authorship,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 541.

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Bauckham, *2 Peter, Jude*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1983), 224; Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 129; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 319.

<sup>13</sup> Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, 324.

really moves, carried by the wind, so the human writers actually wrote, but did so under the influence of the Holy Spirit. They were carried along to the Holy Spirit's intended destination, so that what they wrote was from God. That is, they wrote God's word.<sup>14</sup>

Feinberg urges his readers not to take the "wind in the sails" metaphor too far, for if the wind suddenly stopped, a sailboat would continue gliding on the surface of the water. Yet if the Spirit were not operating upon the human authors of Scripture, they could not continue to write what God intended them to write. Thus, Richard Bauckham translates 2 Peter 1:21 in the following way: "prophecy never came by the impulse of man, but men impelled by the Holy Spirit spoke from God"<sup>15</sup>

Given that all Scripture is God-breathed, and that all Scripture is the product of the Holy Spirit operating in and through the human authors of Scripture, it seems reasonable to conclude that no Scripture would be written apart from that special work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

A second statement summarizing the biblical data might be called the "humanity of Scripture criterion": Inspiration took place through various modes, which rarely included dictation, and more frequently occurred in seemingly mundane forms of writing. Such writing included human effort (as well as the continuous activity of the Holy Spirit). There are passages of the Bible that indicate that God at times dictated what people should write.<sup>17</sup> However, these passages are relatively few. Usually, the Bible's authors, whether writing history, poetry, or letters, appear to write on their own initiative. When the human author was writing what God was dictating, he must have had a very clear sense that he was writing God's word. It is quite

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<sup>14</sup> Feinberg, *Light in a Dark Place*, 134.

<sup>15</sup> Bauckham, *2 Peter, Jude*, 228. Yet other passages indicate that the Spirit worked through prophets and authors of Scripture: Zech 7:12; Matt 22:43; Acts 1:16; 4:25; Heb 3:7; 4:7.

<sup>16</sup> There may very well be a parallel between inspiration and salvation. Just as "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except in the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:3), and just as no one can see or enter the kingdom of God unless he or she is born again of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3, 5), it seems that no one can write Scripture except when directly empowered by the Holy Spirit.

<sup>17</sup> For example, see Isa 30:8; Jer 30:2; 36:2; Hab 2:2; Rev 2; 3.

possible that in other cases, the Bible's authors were not aware that they were writing God's holy word. Whether the writers of Scripture were endeavoring to express themselves in song (as in the Psalms), to write a theological history (see, for example, Luke 1:1–4), or to write a letter consisting of timely theological reflections to a particular church (as in the case of Paul), in each case, the Spirit was guiding them, operating upon them decisively so that they would write what he wanted them to write. Yet the Spirit's guidance did not eliminate the need for the Bible's authors to think, conduct research, and labor over the correct words to use.

A third statement concerns the backgrounds of the Bible's authors. I'll call this the "authorial background criterion." God providentially prepared the human authors of Scripture prior to inspiration. Inspiration did not occur apart from such preparation.

The Psalmists clearly wrote of their own experiences, including feeling sorrow, being betrayed, and being delivered by God. Paul's letters often contain autobiographical details. The Holy Spirit clearly used the backgrounds, experiences, and personalities of the Bible's authors in directing them to write what they wrote. Yet we should not view these biographical details as outside the realm of God's providence. It appears as though God prepared certain men to write Scripture, so that they would have and be shaped by certain experiences to which they could then refer in their writings.<sup>18</sup> For example, if the words of Paul's letters are exactly as God wanted them to be, then it was necessary that Paul have a certain background. He could not recount his pedigree in Philippians 3:4–6 if he had not been born an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, and if he had not been a Pharisee. According to Paul Helm, "unknown to Paul or to anyone else, Paul's

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<sup>18</sup> Several theologians have noted how divine providence seems to have operated in the lives of Scripture's authors. See Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:438, 443; Feinberg, *Light in Dark Place*, 192–93, 203; B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, ed. Samuel G. Gregg (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 92, 153–60. (The former Warfield reference is to his essay, "The Biblical Idea of Revelation." The latter Warfield reference is to his essay, "The Biblical Idea of Inspiration.")

early life, education and Pharisaism were a preparation not only for his call by grace (Gal. 1:15), but for the particular role he was to play in the early church as the apostle to the Gentiles.”<sup>19</sup> A key part of that role was writing Scripture.

One specific example of God’s providence related to the inspiration of Scripture is revealing. The book of 1 Samuel reports the rise and fall of the first king of Israel, Saul. It also introduces us to David, who is anointed as Saul’s successor and who slays the Philistine giant, Goliath (1 Sam 17). After that event, Saul starts to become jealous of David (1 Sam 18:6–9). Then, “a harmful spirit from God rushed upon Saul” (1 Sam 18:10) and Saul hurled his spear at David. This occurs again in 1 Samuel 19:9. Then, Saul plots to kill David (1 Sam 19:11). The superscription to Psalm 59 ascribes that Psalm to David, “when Saul sent men to watch his house in order to kill him,” a reference to 1 Samuel 19:11.<sup>20</sup> Psalm 59 is David’s prayer that God would rescue him from his enemies. It seems that God’s sending a harmful spirit upon Saul led to this attempt to kill David, which led David to hide from Saul and then compose this Psalm. While it is possible that David might have written this Psalm in different circumstances, this connection between divine activity and biblical composition fits a pattern we find throughout the Bible.

A fourth statement concerns the observation that the writers of Scripture did not always seem to be aware that they were writing Scripture.<sup>21</sup> Call it the “undetectability criterion”: Inspiration often occurred in a manner not discernible or detectable from a human perspective. The work of the Spirit is mysterious, operating in ways that we may not sense. Unless they were

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<sup>19</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 96. Feinberg (*Light in a Dark Place*, 193) makes a similar comment.

<sup>20</sup> I assume Davidic authorship of this Psalm and that the superscriptions of the Psalms are authentic. For information on the titles of the Psalms, see Dale A. Brueggeman, “Psalms 4: Titles,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 613–621. Marvin E. Tate notes a number of parallels between the language of 1 Samuel 19 and Psalm 59. See Tate, *Psalms 51–100*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1998), 95.

<sup>21</sup> According to I. Howard Marshall, “it would be wrong to suggest that the writers felt conscious that they were writing Scripture” (*Biblical Inspiration*, [Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004], 29).



taking dictation, the human authors of Scripture were most likely not aware that they were writing Scripture.<sup>22</sup> If the biblical writers were aware that they were writing Scripture, such knowledge might have been a hindrance. Helm imagines a thought experiment in which he is writing a letter. He imagines that God has not only decreed that he would write such a letter, but also that it would be written “at a particular time and in a particular way.” Helm claims, “It is crucial, in this regard, that I do not *know* that I am destined to write the letter this evening.” The reason that is so is that such knowledge would distort his “usual letter-creating thought processes,” serving as a kind of outward constraint.<sup>23</sup> Yet there is no evidence that the writers of Scripture wrote under constraint, coercion, manipulation, or duress.

That last thought leads us to a fifth statement regarding the disposition of the biblical authors. Let us call it simply the “free will criterion”: The human authors of Scripture wrote freely. The only exception to this rule may be when prophets were commanded to write down the words God dictated to them.

### **Three Models of Providence**

Models of providence can be characterized as indeterministic and deterministic.<sup>24</sup> I will examine three representative models of divine providence: one indeterministic model, open theism; one

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Hodge claims that the writers of Scripture might not have been aware of the Holy Spirit’s work in them any more than the average Christian is aware of the Spirit’s work in the process of sanctification. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 1:157. Carson agrees: “judging by the text of Scripture, it is far from clear that all of the biblical writers were always self-consciously aware that what they were writing was canonical Scripture” (“Approaching the Bible,” 32).

<sup>23</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 140. Would the Psalmists write with such passion, wrestling with God as they did, if they were aware that they were writing Scripture? Would Paul have declared his wish for the Judaizers who insisted on circumcision to “emasculate themselves” (Gal 5:12) if he knew that statement would be included in God’s word for millennia? Would he have “boasted” about himself if he were conscious that such words were also God’s words (2 Cor 11–12)? It’s hard to imagine that he would have written in the way that he did if he knew he were writing Scripture. Paul undoubtedly was aware that he was called by God to be an apostle of Jesus Christ. He knew that his basic message came from God. That, however, is different from believing that his letters were also God’s words.

<sup>24</sup> See chapter 2, “Providence: Risky or Risk-Free?” of Helm, *The Providence of God*, 39–68.

deterministic model, theological determinism; and one model that might be regarded as an indeterministic-deterministic hybrid, Molinism. While there are other models of providence, these three are most commonly found among philosophical theologians and philosophers of religion.<sup>25</sup>

The following definition of open theism (or the openness of God) serves our purposes nicely. According to Jason Nicholls,

The openness of God . . . is a theological viewpoint which teaches that God, in limiting the full extent of his power to control all earthly affairs, enters into give-and-take relationships with his creatures. This thereby renders the outcome of the future as something that is determined partly by God and partly by humans. Hence, the openness view conceives of the future as partly closed and partly open—open to the extent that humans exercise true freedom (*viz.* a kind that is incompatible with determinism, known most commonly as libertarianism) in their decision-making. By far the most distinguishing feature of the openness view is also its most controversial. In short, the indefinite parts of the future are, properly speaking, not yet knowledge; hence, they are not knowable by anyone—including God.<sup>26</sup>

The two key elements of open theism that concern the inspiration of the Bible are its commitment to libertarian freedom and the fact that the future is open. God gives libertarian freedom to his creatures because, in the view of openness theologians, this is the only way for them to make choices that are morally responsible. According to Gregory Boyd, “morally responsible libertarian free will must be, by definition, irrevocable.”<sup>27</sup> Boyd also stresses that God wants his creatures to freely love him and, in his view, love must be freely chosen (in the

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<sup>25</sup> Terrance Tiessen identifies eleven different models of providence. See his *Providence and Prayer: How Does God Work in the World?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000). While it would be useful to see how each of those models might address the doctrine of Scripture, such an evaluation would require a monograph.

<sup>26</sup> Jason A. Nicholls, “Openness and Inerrancy: Can They Be Compatible?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 4 (December 2002): 629n2.

<sup>27</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, “Response to William Lane Craig,” in Paul Kjoss Helseth, William Lane Craig, Ron Highfield, and Gregory A. Boyd, *Four Views of Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 138.

libertarian sense).<sup>28</sup> Therefore, “To the extent that God gives an agent free will, he *cannot* meticulously control what that agent does.”<sup>29</sup>

The other element of open theism relevant to our discussion is the openness of the future. Openness theists believe that God knows everything that can be known. Yet the future does not yet exist; it is not something that can be known by anyone, even God.

What this means for inspiration is that God could not determine what the Bible’s authors freely wrote. If they were free in the libertarian sense, then the Holy Spirit could persuade them to write what he wanted them to write, but the Spirit’s persuasion could have been rejected. At the heart of libertarian free will is the free agent’s self-determination.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, if the human author of Scripture wrote freely, there simply was no guarantee that what he wrote is what God wanted him to write.<sup>31</sup> Yet open theists do not see this as necessarily a problem. Nicholls counters that objection by stating, “simply because it might have been theoretically possible for a biblical writer to err as he wrote under the Spirit’s inspiration does not mean that he necessarily had to err—or that any writer in fact did.”<sup>32</sup>

However, that still leaves the issue of prophecy. The Bible contains prophecies about the future. If the future is open, how can such prophecies be correct? Though our discussion thus far has not linked inspiration to the doctrine of inerrancy, the latter flows quite naturally out of the former. Because the Bible is God’s inspired word, and because God doesn’t lie, Scripture must

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<sup>28</sup> Gregory A. Boyd, “God Limits His Control,” in Paul Kjoss Helseth, William Lane Craig, Ron Highfield, and Gregory A. Boyd, *Four Views of Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 188.

<sup>29</sup> Boyd, “God Limits His Control,” 191. Nichols agrees (“Openness and Inerrancy,” 640).

<sup>30</sup> Thomas P. Flint, *Providence: The Molinist Account*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>31</sup> This point is made by Stephen J. Wellum, “Divine Sovereignty-Omniscience, Inerrancy, and Open Theism: An Evaluation,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 45, no. 2 (June 2002): 267, 269.

<sup>32</sup> Nicholls, “Openness and Inerrancy,” 637.

tell the truth, including the truth about the future. Yet if the future cannot be foreknown, how can statements about the future be true?

Openness proponents frequently distinguish between various types of prophecies regarding the future. There are prophecies that are conditional. If people will obey God, then X will happen. If they continue to sin, then not-X or Y will occur.<sup>33</sup> Then, there are prophecies based on current trends. God can see how events in the past and events in the present will likely play out in the future, and such predictions do not violate free will. Finally, there are prophecies about what God will freely do in the future, activities that do not violate the libertarian free will of his creatures.<sup>34</sup>

While such a distinction between types of prophecies clarifies the kinds of statements that God makes about the future, that doesn't rule out error. Free creatures could act in surprising and unpredictable ways that God could not foresee. How then can God's inspired word be inerrant?

At least one open theist sees this problem and has proposed a solution. Nicholls believes that, "as a general rule, humans exercise libertarian freedom."<sup>35</sup> However, in order for God to realize his purposes, "this must mean that there are times when God overrules obstinate free wills." Nicholls calls this "select determinism."<sup>36</sup> Such determinism is "relatively infrequent and almost always temporary."<sup>37</sup> It is not clear how Nicholls believes God used such determinism, but he seems to suggest that God overruled the wills of individuals to ensure that prophecies about the future would be true.<sup>38</sup> According to him, "even in the openness view, God still retains both the ability and the prerogative to intervene in human affairs in those instances when, in his

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<sup>33</sup> Jeremiah 18:7–10 is frequently quoted as the operating principle behind such conditional prophecies.

<sup>34</sup> William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 194–95.

<sup>35</sup> Nicholls, "Openness and Inerrancy," 631.

<sup>36</sup> Nicholls, "Openness and Inerrancy," 643.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholls, "Openness and Inerrancy," 644.

<sup>38</sup> For example, overriding the will of Cyrus so that he would fulfill prophecies contained in Isa 44:28ff.

perfect wisdom, he deems it absolutely necessary. This was a prerogative that God had when he initially inspired human authors to compose an inerrant text.”<sup>39</sup>

The next model of providence I will examine is theological determinism, sometimes simply called Calvinism. For simplicity’s sake, I’ll call it the Reformed view. On this view, all that will ever happen in the world is the result of God’s eternal decree. God can therefore be understood as the ultimate cause of all that comes to pass. Bavinck expresses this concept succinctly: “All things have a cause, and that cause is ultimately a component in the almighty and all-wise will of God.”<sup>40</sup> Reformed theologians often stress that God has control over every aspect of his creation.<sup>41</sup>

Though God is the primary cause of all things, he often operates through secondary causes, his creatures. According to Bavinck, “God so preserves things and so works in them that they themselves work along with him as secondary causes.”<sup>42</sup> Though “secondary causes are strictly subordinated to God as the primary cause,” and “though they are totally dependent on the primary cause, [they] are at the same time also true and essential causes.”<sup>43</sup>

The Reformed view of providence maintains that humans have compatibilistic freedom: though humans will do what God has decreed, they are free in the sense that their actions are the result of their desires, they are not coerced or compelled by some outward event or circumstance, and it is logically possible that they could have chosen otherwise.<sup>44</sup> God, in ways that are

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<sup>39</sup> Nicholls, “Openness and Inerrancy,” 649.

<sup>40</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:604.

<sup>41</sup> Helm captures this nicely: “God controls all persons and events equally. . . . Not only is every atom and molecule, every thought and desire, kept in being by God, but every twist and turn of each of these is under the direct control of God” (*The Providence of God*, 20, 22). In his view, “the providence of God is fine-grained; it extends to the occurrence of individual actions and to each aspect of each action” (p. 104).

<sup>42</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:609–10.

<sup>43</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:613–14.

<sup>44</sup> Stephen J. Wellum, “The Importance of the Nature of Divine Sovereignty for Our View of Scripture,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 77.

mysterious and perhaps impossible for us to discern, causes humans to freely choose to do what he—and they—desire. Though this may seem strange to some, as Helm observes, “The New Testament appears to find no incoherence in the idea of being made to be free.”<sup>45</sup>

It is not difficult to see how this model of providence applies to the inspiration of Scripture. As the primary cause, God is the ultimate author of Scripture. Yet the human authors are truly authors; they are real, secondary, proximate causes. According to Reformed theology, “There is no division of labor between God and his creature, but the same effect is totally the effect of the primary cause as well as totally the effect of the proximate cause. The product is also in the same sense totally the product of the primary as well as totally the product of the secondary cause.”<sup>46</sup> Such theology easily explains the concursive writing of Scripture. According to J. I. Packer, the human authors’ writing “was *both* free and spontaneous on their part *and* divinely elicited and controlled, and what they wrote was not only their own work, but also God’s work.”<sup>47</sup>

The third and final model of providence that I will consider is Molinism. Molinism is something of a hybrid between indeterministic and deterministic models of providence. It combines a risk-free view of providence with libertarian free will. Thomas Flint acknowledges that much: “The Molinist picture of providence constitutes an attempt to blend together two distinct notions which are independently attractive to the orthodox Christian. The first of these is the strong notion of divine providence typically affirmed by Christians through the centuries; the second is the libertarian picture of freedom.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Helm, *The Providence of God*, 55.

<sup>46</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:614–15.

<sup>47</sup> J. I. Packer, “*Fundamentalism*” and *the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 80 (original emphasis).

<sup>48</sup> Flint, *Divine Providence*, 11.

The key to the combination of these two concepts is God's use of middle knowledge. God knows the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom; he knows what a person would do freely (in the libertarian sense) if she were placed in a specific set of circumstances. To achieve his desired outcomes (or, at least, to achieve what he desires among all feasible worlds), God need only actualize a world that features the circumstances that lead to those outcomes. Flint explains how Molinism can be thought of in four logical (though not necessarily temporal) moments:

First, God has natural knowledge—he knows all necessary truths. Second, he has middle knowledge—he knows all contingent truths over which he has no control. As we have seen, given this natural and middle knowledge, God knows what world would in fact result from any creative act of will he might perform. In the third logical moment, God decides upon a particular creative act of will—he decides which beings to create in which circumstances. From this divine decision and the knowledge which precedes it flow not only all the contingent creaturely events ultimately precipitated by God's creative action, but also (and immediately) the fourth logical moment, in which God knows all the contingent truths under his control—that is, in which he has free knowledge.<sup>49</sup>

In this manner, God can control all that happens in his world, he knows all that will happen, and his creatures can retain libertarian freedom.

How does this apply to the inspiration of Scripture? William Lane Craig suggests that

God knew, for example, that were He to create the Apostle Paul in just the circumstances he was in around AD 55, he would freely write to the Corinthian church, saying just what he did in fact say. It needs to be emphasized that those circumstances included not only Paul's background, personality, environment, and so forth, but also any promptings or gifts of the Holy Spirit to which God knew Paul would freely respond.<sup>50</sup>

Since God knew what Paul would write in such circumstances, and since God weakly actualized the world so that those circumstances would obtain, we can say that God “weakly actualized the writing of the Pauline corpus.”<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Flint, *Divine Providence*, 43.

<sup>50</sup> William Lane Craig, “‘Men Moved by the Holy Spirit Spoke from God’ (2 Peter 1:21): A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration,” *Philosophia Christi* 1, no. 1 (1999): 72.

<sup>51</sup> Craig, “‘Men Moved by the Holy Spirit’”: 73.

It is not clear what role Craig believes the Holy Spirit played in the inspiration of Scripture. While he acknowledges the Holy Spirit's work, he also believes that "it is a mistake to equate inspiration with this movement, so as to imply that because Scripture is verbally inspired therefore the authors were moved immediately by the Holy Spirit to write that or this particular word."<sup>52</sup> Craig thinks that inspiration, or the property of being God-breathed, is one that belongs not to the authors of Scripture, nor to the process of writing Scripture, but to the text itself. On his view, it was possible for God, knowing the counterfactuals of creaturely freedom, to weakly actualize a world such that he could "produce a book of Scripture by means of His providence alone without His acting as a primary cause influencing the writing itself."<sup>53</sup> In other words, God knows that if, say, Paul were to be placed in certain circumstances, he would freely (in the libertarian sense) write the book of Romans. Quite surprisingly, he concludes, "Even if some book of Scripture were written without any special promptings or assistance of the Holy Spirit, it is Scripture, not in virtue of its inerrancy, but because God in His providence prepared such a book to be His Word to us."<sup>54</sup> If I understand Craig correctly, he is not making an historical claim; rather, he believes that this is a logical possibility.

Another Molinist, John Laing, believes that the Holy Spirit did play a role in the writing of Scripture.<sup>55</sup> Performing something of an exercise in speculation, Laing writes,

suppose that ninety-nine percent of the words were freely chosen by the human authors and one percent of the word choice required direct divine intervention. . . . Why could God not intervene here or there to prevent the human author from writing the wrong word? Why couldn't the proponent of middle knowledge appeal to compatibilist freedom as a possible option for the occasional word (if needed)? It seems that he can.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Craig, "Men Moved by the Holy Spirit": 80.

<sup>53</sup> Craig, "Men Moved by the Holy Spirit": 81.

<sup>54</sup> Craig, "Men Moved by the Holy Spirit": 82.

<sup>55</sup> John D. Laing, *Middle Knowledge: Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2018), 243.

<sup>56</sup> Laing, *Middle Knowledge*, 245.



Like Nicholls, Laing believes that God can act decisively, in a deterministic fashion, if needed.

### **Evaluating the Models**

Now it is time to evaluate these three models of providence in light of the five criteria mentioned earlier. First, we will start with open theism. Can open theism explain the God-breathed criterion? Yes and no. Open theists believe that the Holy Spirit influenced the human authors of Scripture. Yet 2 Peter 1:21 speaks of more than influence or persuasion. If open theism is true, then the Holy Spirit's influence was resistible, but it just so happened that none of the Bible's authors resisted that influence.<sup>57</sup> Of course, God could not foreknow such a thing with certainty. He could only forecast their reaction to the Spirit's influence based on past and present trends.

Open theism could explain the humanity of Scripture, undetectability, and free will criteria. However, it is hard to see how the authorial background criterion could fit into the openness model. If God does not decree or in some way control all that happens, he could not prepare the backgrounds of the human authors of Scripture. At best, he could select human authors that already had what he deemed to be appropriate backgrounds. Can open theism account for the connection between 1 Samuel 19 and Psalm 59 that was noted above? Nicholls might be willing to say that God sent a harmful spirit upon Saul, overriding his free will so that he would attempt to kill David, but I doubt that he would go that far in applying his "select determinism." Even if he did, this would fall short of causing David to write Psalm 59.

Perhaps I should say that open theism cannot properly account for the God-breathed and authorial background criteria unless openness proponents are willing to embrace Nicholls's "select determinism." But such a move is an ad hoc adjustment of the openness model, and it violates an important principle articulated by Boyd: "The irrevocability of free will is important

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<sup>57</sup> Or, on Nicholls's proposal, God's selective determinism overruled such resistance.

for all the same reasons as the uncontrollability of free will. If God had the power to revoke free will whenever he wished, we would once again have to conclude that when God does not revoke an agent's will once he sees that he is going to use it for evil purposes, it can only be because *he does not want to.*"<sup>58</sup> Since one of the perceived benefits of the openness position is its answer to the problem of evil, it seems likely that few open theists will want to apply select determinism at all, or to the extent that the inspiration of Scripture would require.

Let us now consider the Reformed position. It appears that the Reformed position can easily explain the God-breathed criterion. God decreed that Scripture would be written, that certain people would write Scripture, and that the Spirit, the primary cause, would work through them, the secondary causes. We might say that God is the primary author of Scripture and the human writers of Scripture are the secondary authors. The result is that Scripture can be ascribed to, for example, both David and the Spirit.

The Reformed view of providence can also account for the humanity of Scripture. Laing believes that a compatibilist, or Reformed, view has a hard time justifying the variety of Scripture. He states that this position "must argue that the unique vocabularies and writing styles of the human authors, to include grammatical and stylistic errors, were specifically purposed by God."<sup>59</sup> Frankly, I don't see why that is a problem. Why would God not desire variety in Scripture? The diversity of genres and personal styles readily apparent in Scripture reflects the diversity both of God's people and of human experience. If creation itself displays diversity, why wouldn't Scripture?<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Boyd, "God Limits His Control," 192n18 (original emphasis).

<sup>59</sup> Laing, *Middle Knowledge*, 248.

<sup>60</sup> As far as Scripture containing grammatical or stylistic errors, it may be that these features make Scripture more humanly accessible or relatable. While it may be difficult to understand why God would include such features in his word, if the Holy Spirit decisively caused humans to write Scripture, what seems most important is that the propositions that the Bible affirms to be true are indeed true.

One of the strengths of the Reformed position is how well it handles the authorial background criterion. The same could be said of the undetectability criterion. Helm repeatedly points out our inability to detect God's providence in our lives.<sup>61</sup> That is why, in order to understand how God's providence works, we need God to reveal such information to us.

What of the free will criterion? Boyd believes that anything less than libertarian free will would reduce us to "puppets on [God's] hand."<sup>62</sup> Craig contends that such a strong view of providence amounts to "strict mechanical dictation, for man has been reduced to the level of a machine."<sup>63</sup> Of course, the Reformed position is not that humans are puppets or robots. The Holy Spirit moved men in a decisive manner to write what he wanted them to write, but we have no indication that he coerced them to write or that he overrode their personalities. The human authors of Scripture did not write mechanical, robotic prose. Far from it. As the Calvinistic theologian Charles Hodge states, "The sacred writers were not machines. . . . It was men, not machines; not unconscious instruments, but living, thinking, willing minds, whom the Spirit used as his organs."<sup>64</sup>

While it seems clear that the sacred writers were not machines, it also seems clear that there are no examples of the Spirit coming upon a prospective writer of Scripture, only to be resisted or denied. We do not have an example of Moses or Isaiah being prompted to write something, only to rebel against God.<sup>65</sup> So, it seems that if the writers of Scripture wrote freely, such freedom was compatible with God's will, and even compatible with the Holy Spirit causing them to write what they did.

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<sup>61</sup> For example, see Helm, *The Providence of God*, 89.

<sup>62</sup> Boyd, "God Limits His Control," 189.

<sup>63</sup> Craig, "'Men Moved by the Holy Spirit':" 63.

<sup>64</sup> Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:157.

<sup>65</sup> That is not to say, of course, that they never disobeyed God.

How, then, does Molinism fare when it is evaluated by our five criteria? As for the God-breathed criterion, while Molinists seem ready to embrace the role of the Holy Spirit in the writing of Scripture, we have already seen Craig suggest that God could very well have “inspired” the Bible apart from the immediate work of the Holy Spirit. Laing suggests that the Holy Spirit might be reduced to something of an editor, looking over the shoulders, metaphorically speaking, of the writers of Scripture, ready to correct any mistakes they might make.

While Craig may be right to say that it is logically possible, assuming the truth of Molinism, that God could produce a Bible that is regarded as his word without any direct activity on the part of the Holy Spirit, such a generation of Scripture does not match the description of inspiration we find in the Bible.<sup>66</sup> In fact, I don’t see how the human authors could have the divine insight necessary to comment on doctrines such as the Trinity or salvation unless they were immediately guided by the Spirit to do so. As for Laing’s statements, I agree with Benjamin Warfield’s commentary: “The Spirit is not to be conceived as standing outside of the human powers employed for the effect in view, ready to supplement any inadequacies they may show and to supply any defects they may manifest.”<sup>67</sup>

Molinism does seem to be able to satisfy the other four criteria. Its main problem is that it suggests that the Bible’s authors could write Scripture apart from any direct involvement of the Holy Spirit. Yet the Bible states that all Scripture is God-breathed, and that God’s breath is the Holy Spirit, carrying men along to write what he willed.

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<sup>66</sup> The irony of the title of Craig’s essay is stunning. The title features a quotation of 2 Pet 1:21, yet Craig seems to ignore Peter’s words.

<sup>67</sup> Warfield, “The Biblical Idea of Revelation,” 95.

The Molinist position seems to fit quite comfortably with Nicholas Wolterstorff's claim that the Bible is "divinely appropriated human discourse."<sup>68</sup> Some of that appropriated discourse, he says, will be divine discourse. In his view, divine discourse comprises the words delivered directly through the prophets ("Thus says the LORD . . ."). The rest of the Bible may be the product of "divine supervision—inspiration, let us say." But this isn't necessary. "All that is necessary for the whole to be God's book is that all the human discourse it contains have been appropriated by God."<sup>69</sup>

Wolterstorff gives a number of examples of appropriated discourse in the human realm. For example, "One finds a witty birthday card in a shop, signs it, and sends it off."<sup>70</sup> The Molinist asks us to imagine God searching among all feasible worlds, which must be a very large number indeed, until he finds a set of words that closely approximates what he desires to communicate to his people. God is like a man looking at an incredibly large inventory of anniversary cards, selecting one that he finds suitable. He may correct a word or add a word, and then he appropriates it by purchasing it, signing it, and mailing it. Are these words really his in any meaningful sense? This idea of appropriating words does not match the biblical data, and that is the real problem. Blocher is correct when he claims, "The distance between Wolterstorff's account of divine discourse and what biblical evidence compels us to accept is glaring. . . . His sharp intelligence misses the concerns and certainties that are biblically paramount: that the prophets' words *originated* with God and were uttered in utter dependence on God's leading and protecting (from any extraneous interference) as they were borne along by the Holy Spirit."<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1995), 53.

<sup>69</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 54. Later, he claims that "a doctrine of inspiration really is a supplement" (187).

<sup>70</sup> Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse*, 41.

<sup>71</sup> Blocher, "God and the Scripture Writers," 521.

## **Conclusion**

The model of providence that best accounts for the biblical data regarding the inspiration of Scripture is theological determinism. Both open theism and Molinism do not reflect the activity of the Holy Spirit as described in the Bible. Interestingly, both Nicholls and Laing seem to admit that at times, God might need to act in a deterministic fashion. Such concessions reveal weaknesses in their models of providence. Yet the Reformed notion of dual agency and compatibilistic freedom is exactly what we find in the Bible's description of the writing of Scripture. The freedom with which the human authors of Scripture wrote, compatible with God's meticulous providence, seems to be a perfect example of compatibilistic freedom. This demonstrates that the notion of compatibilistic freedom is not only coherent, but that it is also biblical.

If the Bible is the story of providence, and if that story suggests that one model of providence best explains its inspiration, then Christians would do well to embrace that model.

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