this view is capable of "proof" in any hard sense. We know that our arguments are open to question, and we welcome the discussion we hope they will generate. We also recognize that this articulation of the openness of God is not the final word on the topic. Much more needs to be said in explaining and defending this particular view of God. This book raises numerous issues for future research projects, and we invite others to join us in exploring the paradigm.

Finally, a word about the composition of the book. Though there are five authors, the book is designed to read like a monograph. Like a five-course dinner prepared by five chefs, each author was asked to write a specific section. Each prepared a particular chapter while keeping in mind how it contributed to the whole. After an author completed a draft of his chapter, he sent it to the other four for comments and suggestions. The spirited and enjoyable interchange that ensued greatly improved each chapter and resulted in views on which we all generally agree. The issues on which we are not of one mind are duly noted.

Richard Rice begins by exploring the biblical materials that support the openness of God. John Sanders then asks why traditional theology does not interpret this biblical material in the same way as the open view. Next, Clark Pinnock presents a theological perspective on the open view of God, followed by William Hasker's philosophical defense of the model. David Basinger concludes by spelling out some of the practical implications of the open view and comparing them with the implications of other models.

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.

1 Biblical Support for a New Perspective

Richard Rice

What kind of God created the world? What kind of world did God create? Over the centuries no questions have attracted more philosophical and theological attention, stirred up more controversy or generated more vigorous differences of opinion. The reason, of course, is that no questions are more fundamental to our understanding of who we are and what purpose our existence serves. As Christians, the answers we give to these questions influence everything we believe and, perhaps more important, have a profound impact on the way we live.

The Traditional View of God

For most of Christian history, one idea of God and his relation to the world has dominated the church's perspective, among thinkers and general believers alike, and it prevails in the attitudes of most Christians today. This traditional, or conventional, view emphasizes God's sovereignty, majesty and glory. God's will is the final explanation for all that happens; God's glory is the ultimate purpose that all creation serves. In his infinite power, God brought the world into existence in order to fulfill his purposes and display his glory. Since his sovereign will is irresistible, whatever he dictates comes to pass and every event plays its role in his grand design. Nothing can thwart or hinder the accomplishment of his purposes. God's relation to the world is thus one of mastery and control.

In this perspective God is supreme in goodness as well as in power; he is caring and benevolent toward his creatures. Yet God is equally glorified and his purposes are equally well served by the obedience of the righteous, the rebellion of sinners, the redemption of the saints and the destruction of the wicked.

According to this influential view, God dwells in perfect bliss outside the sphere of time and space. From his lofty vantage point, he apprehends the whole of created reality in one timeless perception: past, present and future alike appear before him. But though he fully knows and cares for the created world, he remains essentially unaffected by creaturely events and experiences. He is untouched by the disappointment, sorrow or suffering of his creatures. Just as his sovereign will brooks no opposition, his serene tranquillity knows no interruption.

Millard J. Erickson's *Christian Theology* clearly reflects this perspective, especially when it discusses "the divine plan." According to Erickson, God's plan is "from all eternity," so "there is no temporal sequence to God's willing. It is one coherent simultaneous willing." Moreover, God is not affected by any outside influence when he decides something, particularly not by human input. His sovereign will is the only consideration. The purpose of God's plan is God's glory, "the highest of all values, and the one great motivating factor in all that God has chosen and done." True, God provides for salvation in order to fulfill his love for human beings and his concern for their welfare. But these are strictly "secondary motivations." The "greater end" is God's own glory.

God's plan is also all-inclusive. "There are no areas that fall outside the purview of his concern and decision." This includes human actions and decisions too—evil ones as well as good. Nothing happens that God's will has not ordained. Finally, God's plan is efficacious; it cannot fail to reach fulfillment. "What he has purposed from eternity will surely come to pass." "He will not change his mind, nor will he discover hitherto unknown considerations which will cause him to alter his intentions."[1]

Proponents of this traditional perspective find support in a number of biblical statements. The most important of them emphasize the radical

difference between God and everything else. Many texts, of course, affirm the majesty and glory of God: "Who is he, this King of glory? The LORD Almighty—he is the King of glory" (Ps 24:10); "I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple" (Is 6:1); "God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Tim 6:15-16). God transcends all creaturely reality. He is unique and utterly incomparable: "Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?" (Ex 15:11); "You shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20:3); "Who is God besides the LORD?" (Ps 18:31); "You alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth" (Is 37:16); "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me" (Is 46:9). He cannot be equated with anything finite. In contrast to all finite things, the traditional view maintains, God is utterly changeless: "I the LORD do not change" (Mal 3:6); "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows" (Jas 1:17).

According to Stephen Charnock's classic work on the divine attributes, immutability is one of God's central characteristics.[2] It applies most obviously to God's existence. In the creaturely sphere, things come and go, begin and end, live and die. Unlike them, God has the attribute of eternity. He has always existed and will never cease to exist. "Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps 90:2). His life alone is independent and underived: "who alone is immortal" (1 Tim 6:16).

Divine transcendence also applies to God's power. In fact, the possession of supreme power is one of the most obvious things that distinguishes God from everything else. Certain texts seem to indicate that God's power is limitless. Unlike mortals, God does whatever he chooses and nothing can resist his might. "Is anything too hard for the LORD?" (Gen 18:14); "Power and might are in your hand, and no one can withstand you" (2 Chron 20:6); "With God all things are possible" (Mt 19:26); his power is "incomparably

great" Eph 1:19), and he "is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph 3:20). Biblical writers use the expression "almighty" of God numerous times, occasionally as a proper name: "I am God Almighty," he announced to Abraham (Gen 17:1); "The Almighty is beyond our reach and exalted in power," Elihu told Job (Job 37:23); "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty" is the constant refrain of the four creatures in the book of Revelation (Rev 4:8).

In light of certain biblical statements, God's plans or intentions also appear changeless. Unlike human beings, God does not change his mind. "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind," Balaam exclaimed. "Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?" (Num 23:19). When Samuel told Saul that the Lord had torn the kingdom of Israel from him and given it to another, he added, "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind" (1 Sam 15:29).

Like many other theologians, Charnock applies changelessness to God's knowledge. Since God's being is timeless, his knowledge is timeless too. "His knowledge being eternal, includes all times; there is nothing past or future with him."[3] Consequently, nothing ever enters God's knowledge; it is already there. "God hath known from all eternity all that which he can know. . . . He knows not at present any more than he hath known from eternity: and that which he knows now he always knows: 'All things are open and naked before him' (Heb 4:13)."[4] God's infinite knowledge also includes an exhaustive understanding of the future. "God knows all things before they exist," Charnock asserts.[5] "Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD"; "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Ps 139:4, 16).

Charnock sees a close relation between God's plans and his knowledge. God knows the future completely because he has planned it completely: "his declaration of things to come, is founded upon his appointment of things to come." "God's knowledge doth not arise from things because they are, but because he wills them to be; and therefore he knows everything that shall be."[6] "I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient

times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please" (Is 46:10).

It is not difficult to see why this elevated view of God has attracted widespread support over the centuries and even why many people find it religiously helpful. It preserves God's radical transcendence and affirms God's sovereignty by giving him complete control over the universe. It conveys the assurance that everything in our lives happens in precise accordance with God's will. And it enjoys the apparent support of many biblical passages.

The Scriptures contain such vast and varied material that it is not difficult to surround an idea with biblical quotations. The crucial question is whether the idea is faithful to the overall biblical portrait of God—the picture that emerges from the full range of biblical evidence. My contention is that this familiar concept does not reflect faithfully the spirit of the biblical message, in spite of the fact that it appeals to various biblical statements. The broad sweep of biblical testimony points to a quite different understanding of the divine reality. In what follows I shall not attempt a point-by-point refutation of the conventional view of God. Instead, I shall identify some central elements in the biblical portrait of God and show that this portrait is compatible with some of the passages that seem to raise questions about it.

The Open View of God

The view of God and his relation to the world presented in this book provides a striking alternative to the concept just described. It expresses two basic convictions: 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. These convictions lead the contributors to this book to think of God's relation to the world in dynamic rather than static terms. This conclusion has important consequences. For one thing, it means that God interacts with his creatures. Not only does he influence them, but they also exert an influence on him. As a result, the course of history is not the product of divine action alone. God's will is not the ultimate explanation for everything that happens; human decisions and actions make an impor-

tant contribution too. Thus history is the combined result of what God and his creatures decide to do.

Another consequence of this conviction concerns God's knowledge. As an aspect of his experience, God's knowledge of the world is also dynamic rather than static. Instead of perceiving the entire course of human existence in one timeless moment, God comes to know events as they take place. He learns something from what transpires. We call this position the "open view of God" because it regards God as receptive to new experiences and as flexible in the way he works toward his objectives in the world. Since it sees God as dependent on the world in certain respects, the open view of God differs from much conventional theology. Yet we believe that this dependence does not detract from God's greatness, it only enhances it.

Later chapters in this book will explore the theological and practical implications of this view of God and address some of the philosophical questions it raises. My task here is to examine the biblical evidence that supports it. Every Christian account of God claims to have the support of the Bible, including, as we have just seen, the conventional view of God's relation to the world. There is good reason for this: agreement with Scripture is the most important test for any theological proposal. By definition, the task of Christian theology is to interpret the contents of the Bible. So, unless the perspective on God presented in this book can claim biblical support, it has little to recommend it to believing Christians.

What, then, is the biblical view of God? It is a challenge to ascertain the biblical view of almost anything, let alone the most important idea of all. The Bible contains an enormous range of material, and on almost any significant topic we can find diverse statements if not diverse perspectives as well.[7] This is certainly true of the idea of God. Thousands of texts refer to God, and they are immensely varied. Sometimes the language employed seems clearly figurative or symbolic: God is often compared to things in the natural world like wind, rocks, plants and animals. The Bible also applies many human qualities to God—physical, mental and emotional. God performs various human roles, including those of a king, a shepherd, a warrior, a potter and a mother. Other biblical language sounds more literal than

symbolic or figurative. Occasionally we find lists of divine characteristics or qualities, and a couple of passages read like straightforward definitions of God.

Nearly all of the Bible's descriptions of God fall within the broad designation of "metaphor," a topic that has received massive scholarly attention in recent years. Put very simply, a metaphor is a comparison; it describes one thing as if it were another, or attributes to one thing the qualities of something else. If we insist that every description of God be labeled either "literal" or "symbolic," as some theologians seem to do,[8] then biblical metaphors obviously belong to the latter category. But most scholars would reject a sharp division between literal and figurative theistic language in the Bible. This implies that all metaphors are alike, and such a view obscures the rich variations within the biblical descriptions of God.[9]

While no metaphor provides us with a literal account of the divine reality—a one-to-one correspondence to its object—this does not mean that all metaphors are equally distant from the object represented. For example, the Bible variously refers to God as a rock (Ps 31:2-3), a shepherd (Ps 23:1) and a human parent (Hos 11:1). But most Christians would agree that God is more like a shepherd than a rock, and more like a parent than a shepherd. So within the broad spectrum of biblical metaphors, some are more important than others. These metaphors bear a stronger resemblance to the divine reality—they are closer, so to speak, to the intended object—and they play a more prominent role within the overall biblical account of God. To use Terence Fretheim's expression, these are "controlling metaphors": "they are able to bring coherence to a range of biblical thinking about God; they provide a hermeneutical key for interpreting the whole."[10]

The purpose of this chapter is to restore some important biblical metaphors to the prominence they deserve in our thinking about God, in particular metaphors such as divine suffering and divine repentance. Giving such metaphors more weight will enable us to achieve an understanding of God that is much more faithful to the Bible than is the familiar alternative.

Due to the immense scope and variety of the biblical material that deals

with God, this study will attempt neither a comprehensive survey nor a historical reconstruction of biblical thought. At the same time, we must avoid being narrowly selective. Accordingly, I will review some representative passages of Scripture that support the open view of God, and then look at some of the passages that raise questions about it. Let us begin with the most important description of God in the Bible, explore its meaning for human existence, and then examine several Old and New Testament passages that extend and illuminate this conception of the divine reality.

Two streams of biblical evidence support an interactive view of God's relation to the world. One consists of statements that affirm in one way or another that God is responsive to what happens in the creaturely world, that what happens there affects God somehow—by evoking a certain emotion, a change in attitude, a change in plans. The other consists of statements that indicate creaturely freedom in one way or another. These include various divine warnings and promises and calls to repentance, as well as fairly straightforward assertions that presuppose creaturely alternatives.

Divine Love and the Openness of God

From a Christian perspective, *love* is the first and last word in the biblical portrait of God. According to 1 John 4:8: "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." The statement *God is love* is as close as the Bible comes to giving us a definition of the divine reality.[11] And, as Eberhard Jüngel observes, Christian theology has always given this expression pride of place among the many descriptions of God.[12]

The immediate context of these familiar words is instructive. "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. . . . If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us" (1 Jn 4:9-10, 15-16). As these verses show, God's love was completed in sending his Son.

Although it appears only in 1 John, the assertion *God is love* succinctly

summarizes a pervasive biblical theme. The psalmist describes God as "abounding in steadfast love" (Ps 103:8 NRSV; cf. v. 13). He has everlasting love for his people (Is 54:8). According to many passages, his love or kindness goes on forever.[13] God's love is the rationale for Israel's beginning as a nation: "It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut 7:8). It explains God's steadfast commitment to his people in spite of their infidelities: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness" (Jer 31:3); "in his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old" (Is 63:9).

God's love comes to its fullest expression in the life and death of Jesus. According to numerous New Testament passages, the giving of his Son is the greatest manifestation of God's love: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Rom 8:32); "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8); "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

So the statement *God is love* embodies an essential biblical truth. It indicates that love is central, not incidental, to the nature of God. Love is not something God happens to do, it is the one divine activity that most fully and vividly discloses God's inner reality. Love, therefore, is the very essence of the divine nature. Love is what it means to be God.

There is widespread theological support for the idea that love is central to both the revelation and the reality of God. Abraham Joshua Heschel, a Jewish theologian, notes the striking contrast between God's anger and love as the two are described in the Hebrew Scriptures.[14] He points out a profound difference in their duration. God's anger is temporary, his love is permanent: "His anger is but for a moment; his favor is for a lifetime" (Ps 30:5 NRSV); "In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you" (Is 54:8 NRSV).

God is also reluctant to get angry, but eager to show mercy (Ex 34:6; Ps 103:8). Heschel concludes that in the prophetic view of God love is essential, while anger is only incidental. God's "normal or original pathos," he observes, "is love or mercy." "The pathos of anger is . . . a transient state," "by no means regarded as an attribute, as a basic disposition, as a quality inherent in the nature of God."[15] It is always described "as a moment, something that happens rather than something that abides." "The prophets never speak of an angry God as if anger were His disposition."[16] In contrast to the numerous applications to God of such words as *good, righteous, merciful* and *gracious,* the expression *angry God* appears in the Old Testament only once (Nahum 1:2).[17]

A similar emphasis on God's love appears in "The Being of God as the One Who Loves," a section of Karl Barth's great *Church Dogmatics.* For Barth, divine revelation does not add to our understanding of God's essence, it defines that essence. Accordingly, God's revelation is nothing less than his "self-revelation": we see who and what God is only where he reveals himself. And what does revelation tell us? That God is "He who, without having to do so, seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us."[18] God is therefore "the One who loves." Indeed, "that He is God—the Godhead of God—consists in the fact that He loves."[19] "God loves because . . . this act is His being, His essence and His nature."[20]

Numerous theologians echo Barth's emphases. According to Emil Brunner, the assertion *God is love*—the "most daring statement that has ever been made in human language"—means that love is not a mere quality or attribute that God happens to have in common with other beings; it is the very nature of God himself. Moreover, we understand God's love only in the event of divine revelation.[21] We come to see that God is love only through his self-giving in Christ. Similarly, Walter Kasper concludes that God "must in himself be freedom in love and love in freedom" because God shows himself, especially through the cross of Christ, to be "the one who loves in freedom and is free in loving." "From eternity, therefore, God must be self-communicating love."[22] And Wolfhart Pannenberg states, "Only in the love of God does the concrete form of his essence come to expression."[23]

The crucial importance of love requires us to revise a great deal of conventional thought about God. According to standard definitions, "gods" are beings who surpass humans in power and intelligence, and the Christian concept of God is one that includes love in its list of divine attributes. Such an account is misleading, however. According to the Bible, God is not a center of infinite power who happens to be loving, he is loving above all else. Consequently, when we enumerate God's qualities, we must not only include love; to be faithful to the Bible we must put love at the head of the list.

In the thinking of many Christians, however, even this fails to capture the biblical emphasis. As they interpret the Bible, love is not only more important than all of God's other attributes, it is more fundamental as well. Love is the essence of the divine reality, the basic source from which *all* of God's attributes arise. This means that the assertion *God is love* incorporates all there is to say about God. In Barth's words, "All our further insights about who and what God is must revolve round this mystery—the mystery of His love. In a certain sense they can only be repetitions and amplifications of the one statement that 'God loves.' "[24] For Pannenberg as well, the attributes of God's essence that appear in various Old Testament passages like Exodus 34:6[25] and throughout the New Testament "may be understood through and through as the attributes of his love." So, "the goodness, grace, righteousness, faithfulness, wisdom and patience of God do not take us beyond the thought of divine love but describe different aspects of its reality."[26] Love is the concrete reality that unifies all of the attributes of God.[27] A doctrine of God that is faithful to the Bible must show that all of God's characteristics derive from love.[28]

It is not surprising that the topic of divine love has received so much theological attention. A well-known feature of the New Testament writings is the use of *agapē* to express God's love. Unlike other Greek words whose meanings are broadly covered by the English word *love, agapē* has an unconditional element. It refers to affection motivated by the subject, not the object of love. God loves us, not because we are lovable but because he is loving. Spontaneous and unconditional though it is, God's love is not a

mechanical outpouring, an inexorable natural process. God's love can never be taken for granted. The Bible indicates that God is deeply sensitive to the ones he loves.

With this initial summary in mind, let us look more closely at some of the important biblical evidence that emphasizes God's love and thus supports the open view of God.

■ Old Testament Evidence for the Openness of God

In recent years a number of biblical scholars have explored some neglected themes in the Hebrew Scriptures that support the open view of God. Their work indicates that God interacts with the world in a give-and-take fashion and that God's inner experience of the world is rich with emotion. As they interpret the Old Testament perspective, God's life exhibits two important qualities: it is social, and it is dynamic. God enters into relationships and genuinely interacts with human beings. He affects them, and they, in turn, have an effect on him. As a result, God's life exhibits transition, development and variation. God experiences the temporal world in a temporal way.

Following one scholar's review of the Old Testament material,[29] I will explore three specific elements in the divine life that point to its social and dynamic character: God's emotions, intentions and actions.

God's Feelings

The Old Testament attributes to God a wide range of feelings, including joy, grief, anger and regret. Many references involve divine pleasure. The repeated exclamation of Genesis 1, "and God saw that it was good," seems to express warm personal satisfaction. A number of passages speak of God as taking delight in various things. "For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation" (Ps 149:4). "The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your fathers" (Deut 30:9). " 'I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the Lord" (Jer 9:24). " 'Is not Ephraim my dear son, the child in whom I delight? Though I often speak against him, I still remember him. Therefore my heart yearns for

him; I have great compassion for him,' declares the LORD" (Jer 31:20).[30] According to one memorable description, God takes such great delight in his people that he rejoices over them with singing (Zeph 3:17).

The most touching descriptions of God's inner life involve his reaction to the unfaithfulness of his chosen people. The Hebrew prophets speak of God and Israel in familial terms, drawing on the relations of parent and child, husband and wife. The most dramatic of these is Hosea's description of Israel as the wanton wife of God.[31] Acting on God's instructions, Hosea married a promiscuous woman. She deserted him, and though deeply wounded, he won her back and their marriage began again. According to the prophet, the experience perfectly illustrates God's relationship with Israel. Like Hosea's faithless wife, Israel abandoned the Lord to pursue other lovers, thinking they were the source of her security.

God responded by rejecting her ("she is not my wife, and I am not her husband," 2:2), resolving to disown her children ("the children of adultery," 2:4), destroy her false sense of security ("Therefore I will take away my grain when it ripens, and my new wine when it is ready. I will take back my wool and my linen, intended to cover her nakedness," 2:9) and subject her to public disgrace ("I will expose her lewdness before the eyes of her lovers," 2:10). His thoughts of revenge give way, however, to the promise of reconciliation: "Therefore I am now going to allure her; I will lead her into the desert and speak tenderly to her. . . . I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD" (2:14, 19-20).

This powerful poem tracks a succession of intense feelings, from jealousy and anger to hope and joy. God's response to Israel runs the same gamut of emotion a betrayed husband would feel, with the significant exception that God longs for reconciliation beyond rejection. In this respect God's behavior transcends the norms that governed husband-wife relations in Israel. Once a divorced woman had remarried, her former husband was forbidden to marry her again. But God promises to marry Israel in spite of her infidelities.[32]

In a similar way two centuries later the prophet Jeremiah used sexually explicit language (some even think pornographic) to describe Judah and Israel's unfaithfulness to God:

> You have lived as a prostitute with many lovers. . . . Look up to the barren heights and see. Is there any place where you have not been ravished? By the roadside you sat waiting for lovers, sat like a nomad in the desert. You have defiled the land with your prostitution and wickedness. . . . You have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame. (Jer 3:1-3; cf. 2:20; 13:26-27)

In Ezekiel, too, we find the idolatrous behavior of Israel and Judah compared to the antics of two promiscuous sisters (Ezek 23). And the thrust of this extended metaphor in all three prophets is the pain that this outrageous behavior inflicts on God. " 'Like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel,' declares the LORD" (Jer 3:20). "Since you have forgotten me and thrust me behind your back, you must bear the consequences of your lewdness and prostitution" (Exek 23:35). Still, as in Hosea, beyond the cries of divine anguish we hear a promise of reconciliation and restoration: "Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding" (Jer 3:22).

In this dramatic prophetic poetry, the most acute human feelings provide a window on the inner life of God. The Bible contains many symbols for God's relation to his people, but none exudes the emotional poignancy of this one. "When God is portrayed as betrayed husband," one scholar observes, "then God's own frustrated desires and suffering are brought into focus." "Through this imagery, the people of Israel are enabled to *feel* God's agony."[33]

The prophets use other human relationships to describe divine emotion as well. Hosea compares God's feelings for Israel with a parent's tender longing for a wayward child:

> When Israel was a child, I loved him. . . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up in my arms. . . . I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. . . . How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hos 11:1, 3, 4, 8 NRSV)

The husband-wife and parent-child metaphors illuminate the experience of God in a unique and indispensable way. Whereas the metaphors of king and subject, judge and criminal emphasize power and punishment in God's relation to his people, these family metaphors emphasize love and commitment.[34]

It is not uncommon for people to dismiss these emotional descriptions of God, numerous though they are, as poetic flights essentially unrelated to the central qualities that the Old Testament attributes to God. As they see it, the real God of the Bible is made of sterner stuff. He is powerful, authoritarian and inflexible, so the tender feelings we read of in the prophets are merely examples of poetic license. As I understand it, however, the evidence supports a strikingly different conclusion. One scholar links these emotion-filled accounts of God's love for Israel directly to the concept of divine oneness, which lies at the heart of biblical religion.[35]

As generally understood, monotheism concentrates in one divine personage all of the powers that ancient religions typically distributed among various divine beings. God does not share his power or glory with any other being. He describes himself as a "jealous God" (Ex 20:5). He alone sustains the natural order, and his will alone is sovereign. Some people believe that monotheism makes God directly responsible for everything that happens in the world, but Tikva Frymer-Kensky draws a completely different conclusion. She asserts that "the reactivity of God" that we see in his powerful emotions for Israel is essential to monotheism, and shows that the one God grants human beings a central role in determining the course of history. God is the ultimate power in reality, but God's activity consists in large measure in responding to human decisions and actions. What he actually decides to do depends directly on the actions of human beings. Far from detracting from the significance of human initiative, then, monotheism heightens and enhances it.

Abraham Joshua Heschel expresses similar convictions in terms of God's

"pathos," a category, he maintains, that is central to the prophets' understanding of God and basic to God's relation to human beings.[36] The basic idea is that human emotions reflect the inner experience of God. Hosea, for example, came to see that the anguish his troubled marriage brought him was "a mirror of the divine pathos, that his sorrow echoed the sorrow of God."[37] Heschel distinguishes pathos from passion, an emotional convulsion that takes possession and drives someone blindly. In contrast to unreasoned emotion, pathos involves free will; it is the "result of decision and determination." The divine pathos points to the fact that "God is concerned about the world, and shares in its fate." He is willing to be "involved in history, intimately affected by events in history." "He not only rules the world in the majesty of His might and wisdom, but reacts intimately to the events of history." "God does not stand outside the range of human suffering and sorrow. He is personally involved in, even stirred by, the conduct and fate of man."[38] Because human beings are so important to God, their existence acquires a new dimension. "Never in history," writes Heschel, "has man been taken as seriously as in prophetic thinking. . . . Whatever man does affects not only his own life, but also the life of God. . . . He is a consort, a partner, a factor in the life of God."[39]

God's Intentions

The Old Testament description of divine intentions also contributes to a social and dynamic portrait of God. Scripture tells us that God formulates plans and purposes and that he occasionally changes his mind. To use a biblical expression, God repents. A later chapter in this book will deal with the philosophical issues that such an idea raises. But the biblical descriptions of divine repentance indicate that God's plans are exactly that—plans or possibilities that he intends to realize. They are not ironclad decrees that fix the course of events and preclude all possible variation. For God to will something, therefore, does not make its occurrence inevitable. Factors can arise that hinder or prevent its realization. Consequently, God may reformulate his plans, or alter his intentions, in response to developments.

The notion of divine repentance plays a much larger role in the biblical

writings than many people realize. The numerous references to it cannot be dismissed as poetic inventions. It emerges as a prevalent theme in the Old Testament, and it applies to a wide range of divine action. God repents in a variety of circumstances. Sometimes God rejects something that he has already done. "The LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (Gen 6:6 NRSV). "The LORD was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (1 Sam 15:35 NRSV).

At other times God repents of something that he said he would do or started to do. The best-known example is Jonah's mission to Nineveh. When the prophet finally reached the great city after his famous detour at sea, he delivered the message that God had given to him. "Forty more days," he proclaimed, "and Nineveh will be overturned" (Jon 3:4). In response to his dire warning, the entire city fasted and prayed. "When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened" (3:10). This, of course, was just what Jonah had feared. "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God," he complained, "slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity" (4:2).

In another well-known instance, God repented in response to human intercession. Not long after their dramatic escape from Egypt, the Israelites worshiped a golden calf as the god who had delivered them from bondage. Outraged at this apostasy, God told Moses that he would destroy the Israelites and make of Moses a great nation. Instead of welcoming the offer, however, Moses pleaded for his people. He feared that such an action would damage God's reputation among the Egyptians; he reminded God of his promises to Abraham, Isaac and Israel that he would make a great nation of their descendants. "Turn from your fierce anger," Moses implored; "relent and do not bring disaster on your people" (Ex 32:12). In response to his entreaties, Exodus records, "the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened" (Ex 32:14).[40]

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. The gist of their remarks is that

God did not change, but circumstances did. According to R. Alan Cole, for example, this statement is clearly an "anthropomorphism" (or, more accurately, an "anthropopathism"), a description of God's action "in strictly human terms." It does not mean "that God changed His mind; still less that He regretted something that He had intended to do. It means . . . that He now embarked on a different course of action from that already suggested as a possibility, owing to some new factor." "We are not to think of Moses as altering God's purpose towards Israel by this prayer, but as carrying it out."[41]

Stephen Charnock takes a similar tack. "God is not changed," he writes, "when of loving to any creatures he becomes angry with them, or of angry he becomes appeased. The change in these cases is in the creature; according to the alteration in the creature, it stands in a various relation to God."[42] So when the Bible says that God "turns" from love to wrath, or from wrath to love, this describes a change in the way people relate to God, not in the way he relates to them.

But a significant feature of this passage does not permit this construction. The fact is that God relents in direct response to Moses' plea, not as a consequence of the people's repentance of their apostasy. The repentance mentioned in this case clearly applies to a change that took place in God, not in his people. Of course, God's essential nature and his ultimate purpose did not change—Moses' appeal presupposes this. But this hardly means that nothing in God really changed. To the contrary, his ultimate objectives required him to change his immediate intentions.

A number of Bible scholars do see this dramatic passage as a clear indication that God underwent a real and important change. In his commentary on Exodus, George A. F. Knight maintains that while God's ultimate purpose remained the same, his specific intention regarding Israel *did* change in response to Moses' inquiry. Moses begs God to repent, using the very same word *(shubh)* 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.[43]

In his comments on this passage, Terence Fretheim carefully charts the steps in God's interaction with Moses. He shows that Israel's fate was determined only gradually, and that Moses genuinely influenced God's final decision. At the outset, the future of the Israelites is really up in the air. God's initial outburst shows that he is deeply hurt by the people's behavior and inclined to reject them, but his decision is not final and, in effect, he invites Moses to "contribute something to the divine deliberation."[44] Moses' vigorous entrance into the discussion shows that "God is not the only one who has something important to say."[45] He appeals to God's reasonableness and reputation, and reminds God of his own promise. In response, God immediately changes his mind: he "repented of the evil" he planned to do.[46] Fretheim concludes that this passage reveals God as "one who is open to change. God will move from decisions made, from courses charted, in view of the ongoing interaction with those affected. God treats the relationship with the people with an integrity that is responsive to what they do and say." "This means that there is genuine openness to the future on God's part."[47]

This incident is reminiscent of Abraham's conversation with his heavenly visitor concerning the fate of Sodom. When God announced that he planned to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham asked him to spare Sodom in order to avoid killing righteous people along with the wicked. "Far be it from you to do such a thing," he exclaimed, "to kill the righteous with the wicked. . . . Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen 18:25). Carefully negotiating in time-honored Middle Eastern fashion, Abraham persuaded God to spare the city if it had as few as ten righteous inhabitants (Gen 18:23-32). Sodom was still destroyed—it must have contained hardly any worthy people—but the story reveals that God sometimes reconsidered his plans in response to human requests.

These incidents indicate that human intercession can influence God's actions. They show that God's intentions are not absolute and invariant; he does not unilaterally and irrevocably decide what to do. When God deliberates, he evidently takes a variety of things into account, including human attitudes and responses. Once he formulates his plans, they are still open

to revision. This appears to be true of even the most emphatic assurances on God's part.

God's covenant with David included this promise regarding David's offspring: "My love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever" (2 Sam 7:15-16). In spite of this firm promise, other passages attach an important condition to the fulfillment of this pledge. As his death approached, David advised Solomon to observe all of God's laws, so "that the LORD may keep his promise to me: 'If your descendants watch how they live, and if they walk faithfully before me with all their heart and soul, you will never fail to have a man on the throne of Israel' " (1 Kings 2:1-4). Solomon himself repeated this promise and its condition in his prayer at the dedication of the temple: "Now LORD, God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, 'You shall never fail to have a man to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your sons are careful in all they do to walk before me as you have done' " (1 Kings 8:25).

The original promise seems to draw a sharp distinction between the way God treated Saul and the way he plans to treat David. Saul's disobedience led to divine rejection, but it will be different for David: God will not reject him. Both David and Solomon, however, understood this promise to depend on the continued obedience of their descendants. Evidently God attached conditions to his promise, even though they were not spelled out at first. What appears to have been an unconditional commitment on God's part turns out to be conditional after all.

We see the importance of divine repentance not only in the number of times it appears but also in the distinctive way in which biblical writers refer to it. Several noteworthy passages present a list of God's essential qualities or characteristics. They catalog the attributes that establish God's identity and that distinguish him from all potential rivals. One such passage describes God's appearance to Moses on Mount Sinai during the giving of the law. "And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The LORD, the LORD,

the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin' " (Ex 34:6-7). The attributes mentioned in such a dramatic moment of revelation have great importance. As we noticed earlier in connection with divine love, these are the qualities that make God what he is, that define the essence of the divine reality.

It is highly significant that several passages of this "defining" sort list divine repentance (or "relenting," as some translations read) among God's essential characteristics. As we have seen, Jonah addressed God as "gracious . . . and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jon 4:2 NRSV). Similarly, Joel said that God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing" (Joel 2:13 NRSV). Formulations like these demonstrate that repentance is not an exceptional action on God's part, let alone something that is out of character for him. To the contrary, it is typical of God to relent from punishment (which is why Jonah was so irritated when Nineveh was spared). In fact, it is his very nature to do so. Accordingly, God does not repent in spite of the fact that he is God; he repents precisely *because* he is God.

The Bible's most extensive account of divine repentance deserves careful attention. As recorded in Jeremiah 18, the Lord sends the prophet to the potter's house, where he observes the man at his wheel, throwing pots and reworking spoiled vessels into other designs. The Lord declares that Israel to him is like clay in the potter's hands. Depending on the circumstances, his plans for Israel can change. He will rework his design in response to the actions of his people. Then follows a statement of the general principle that explains God's actions:

> If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it. (Jer 18:7-10)

The passage concludes with an application of this principle to Israel's situation: "Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, 'This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions' " (Jer 18:11).

There are different ways to read these verses. Some interpreters view them as an affirmation of God's absolute control over creation: God exercises the same mastery over human affairs that a potter has over his clay. But a more natural reading of the passage, we believe, suggests something quite different. What happens to nations is not something that God alone decides and then imposes on them. Instead, what God decides to do depends on what people decide to do. His decisions hinge on the way human beings respond to his threats and warnings. If this is so, a description of intended divine judgment is not an announcement of ineluctable fate, it is a call to repentance. Indeed, the very prediction of impending disaster implies the possibility that it may yet be avoided. If the purpose of such prophecies is to awaken repentance, we must conclude that God sends predictions of judgment precisely in hopes that they will not be fulfilled.[48]

Subsequent verses in Jeremiah 18 confirm this reading. They further emphasize that God is not responsible for what happens to Israel. As the nations will testify, the tragedy befalling Israel resulted from her own perversity, not from the inflexible application of divine power.[49]

This important passage indicates that God is not unilaterally directive in his dealings with human beings. Instead, his relation to us is one of dynamic interaction. God expresses certain intentions and waits to see how people will react. What he finally decides to do depends on their response. As a result, the general course of events is not something for which God is exclusively responsible. To a significant extent it depends on the actions and decisions of human beings.

Although two passages assert that God does *not* repent (in comparison to forty or so indicating that he does so), close inspection reveals that they are exceptions that prove the rule that he can repent when he chooses. Balaam's second oracle includes this statement: "God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind. Has he promised, and will he not do it? Has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?" (Num 23:19 NRSV). When Samuel told Saul that the Lord had torn the kingdom of Israel from him and given it to another, he added, "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind" (1 Sam 15:29). If God's rejection of Saul was irreversible, so was his acceptance of David.

Some construe these denials that God will change his mind as general assertions of divine immutability, but this is not the case. For one thing, the word *repent* in both instances is used synonymously with the word *lie*. The point is not that God never changes, but that God never says one thing while fully intending to do something else. Only in this limited sense of the word does God not "repent." Unlike human beings, God will not say one thing and then arbitrarily do another.[50] Second, these statements pertain to specific promises that God declares he will stand by forever; they do not posit a general principle. Third, the assurance that God will *not* repent presupposes the general possibility that God *can* repent when he chooses. God does not repent in certain cases, not because it is impossible or inconceivable for him to do so, nor because he never does so; he does not repent simply because he chooses not to do so.[51] Fourth, it is noteworthy—"striking," one scholar exclaims—that one of the very chapters that asserts that God does *not* repent (1 Sam 15) contains two statements that he *does* repent (vv. 11, 35). So the scope of this denial obviously is very limited. It is not a statement of general principle.

In addition to the assertions that God does *not* repent because he is not human (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29) are the biblical assertions that God *does* repent because he is not human. According to Hosea 11:8-9, God exclaims, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? . . . My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst" (NRSV). In general, then, God's repentance is a genuine possibility, but one that is foreclosed when God pledges himself unconditionally to a particular course of action.

The biblical descriptions of divine repentance combine elements of emotion and decision to provide a striking picture of the divine reality. They indicate that God is intimately involved in human affairs and that the course of creaturely events has profound effects on him. It stirs his feelings and influences his decisions. He is variously happy and sad, joyful and disappointed, disposed to bring blessing or judgment, depending on the behavior of human beings. God works toward his objectives in history in dynamic interaction with human beings. Their experiences and decisions affect his experience and decisions. So important is the notion of divine repentance in biblical thought that it deserves to be regarded as one of the central themes of Scripture. It represents "an important interpretive vehicle for understanding the divine activity throughout the canon."[52]

Such an interpretation conflicts, of course, with the popular and theologically entrenched idea that God lies utterly beyond the reach of creaturely experience, serenely untouched by our joys and sorrows, overseeing the inevitable fulfillment of his will irrespective of human actions and decisions. To those who hold this perspective, the biblical accounts of divine repentance are so many figures of speech. If references to God's physical appearance are anthropomorphic, descriptions of God's feelings are anthropopathic. They attribute human qualities to the divine being. They embellish the biblical account, but they are not to be taken literally.

This is an influential argument. There is no question that the Bible contains a good many anthropomorphisms and employs numerous figures of speech when it talks about God. The book of Genesis describes God as walking in the Garden of Eden and coming down to inspect the tower of Babel. Several passages attribute to God various features of the human body—eyes, ears, hands, an arm, a mouth, a face and even a backside. In other instances God is said to have appeared to men and women in the form of a human being.[53]

Most Christians rightly construe such descriptions as symbolic and deny that physical form and features characterize the divine being itself. The question is whether we should do the same with references to God's thoughts and feelings. If physical descriptions of the divine reality are not

to be taken literally, is the same true of descriptions of God as deliberating, deciding, acting and feeling? To avoid turning God into an enlarged human being, must we deny not only that God shares our physical properties but our intellectual, volitional and emotional properties too?

This question actually belongs more to the philosophical than the biblical portion of this volume. But it is difficult to see what, if anything, would remain of the idea of God in the wake of such sweeping denials. They would deprive it of any meaningful content. If human beings and God have nothing whatever in common, if we have utterly no mutual experience, then we have no way of talking and thinking about God and there is no possibility of a personal relationship with him.

More to the point here, the Bible itself provides important reasons for taking many of its descriptions of God's thoughts and feelings at face value. One is the frequency with which they appear in Scripture; another is the strategic significance of the passages where we find them. As we have seen, certain passages have a defining function. They specifically indicate what it is that makes God God. Other passages deliberately distinguish God from other things, such as false gods and human beings. Such evidence indicates that the biblical writers were not employing figures of speech or deliberately contriving analogies when they spoke of such things as divine love and divine repentance. Their expressions faithfully portray the inner life of God.

God's Actions

Besides God's feelings and decisions, a third element in the Old Testament indicates that God's life is social and dynamic. This is divine activity. God does things. In fact, the Bible identifies God primarily by describing his actions. To quote a title that was popular years ago, the Bible is "The Book of the Acts of God."[54] The biblical narrative opens with an account of creation (Gen 1—2). And an important confession of faith recounts the central event in Old Testament history, God's deliverance of the Hebrew people from bondage:

My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with

a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor. Then we cried out to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. So the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with miraculous signs and wonders. He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey; and now I bring the firstfruits of the soil that you, O LORD, have given me. (Deut 26:5-10)

Worshipers were to recite these words as they offered the firstfruits of their harvest to God. The setting underscores the importance of the words. It shows that the Hebrew people identified God by his actions. They understood who he was in light of what he had done.

The Bible attributes to God both general activities and specific actions. Some of what God does is ongoing, or continuous. For example, God acts to uphold the created order and sustain human life (Neh 9:6; Acts 17:28). But some of God's actions are discrete. He causes certain things to happen, and brings about specific states of affairs.

This is not the place to develop a philosophy of action, but we should note that the very concept of an act involves change. An action makes a difference. It brings about something that would not otherwise exist. In the case of specific acts, it brings about something that did not previously exist. To say that God acts, therefore, means that it makes sense to use the words *before* and *after* when we talk about him. God makes decisions and then he acts. He decides before he acts, he acts after he decides. This is so simple that it sounds trivial, but it points to a fundamental truth about God. Not only does he bring about change, but in a significant sense God himself experiences change. After God acts, the universe is different and God's experience of the universe is different. The concept of divine action thus involves divine temporality. Time is real for God.

We also see divine temporality in the relationship the Bible describes between the purposes and the actions of God. God does things to accomplish his purposes. The fact that God acts to achieve his purposes suggests

a distinction between the *formulation* of God's plans and the *fulfillment* of those plans.[55] A passage like Isaiah 46:9-11 is instructive in this regard. "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention.' . . . I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it" (NRSV). These verses seem to indicate that divine purpose and divine enactment are not one indistinguishable event, but distinct moments in God's experience. God announces his plans; then he acts to implement his plans. Moreover, God acts from time to time throughout the course of human history, not just at the beginning. So the drama of history is not an inexorable outworking of a process instituted at the beginning of time, but a series of events.

This passage fits with some of the others we have seen to demonstrate that the realm of creaturely existence is not a complete and perfect replica of God's design. God has plans, and he acts to bring his plans to fruition. While God contributes to the ongoing course of events, other agents make their contributions, too, and God takes them into account.

When we think of the will of God and the decrees of God, therefore, we must also think of the concrete, dynamic manner in which they are implemented. God's plans are not cast-iron molds to which the course of history passively and perfectly conforms. They are goals that God pursues over time and in different ways. At times, God acts to bring things about unilaterally, as it were. Some things God wants done, so he does them. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1). "God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light" (Gen 1:3). At other times, however, God interacts with creaturely agents in pursuing his goals. He works in and through situations where people are variously receptive and resistant to his influence. God used the hatred of Joseph's brothers to save the Israelites from famine (Gen 45:4-7). God used the hardness of Pharaoh's heart to heighten the drama of Israel's deliverance (Ex 7:3-5). God hoped that Saul would be a good king. When Saul disappointed him, God turned elsewhere (1 Sam 15:35; 16:1). God hoped that his chosen people would remain faith-

ful to him and fulfill their mission. When they proved uncooperative, God revised his plans for them (Mt 21:33-45). God used the treachery of religious and political leaders in offering Jesus as a sacrifice for sin (Acts 2:32). God used the dedication of the apostles to spread the gospel throughout the Mediterranean world (Mt 28:19-20). God will overcome the forces of darkness in their final challenge to his authority (Rev 20:7-10).

To summarize, at times God simply does things, acting on his own initiative and relying solely on his own power. Sometimes he accomplishes things through the cooperation of human agents, sometimes he overcomes creaturely opposition to accomplish things, sometimes he providentially uses opposition to accomplish something, and sometimes his intentions to do something are thwarted by human opposition.

The will of God, therefore, is not an irresistible, all-determining force. God is not the only actor on the stage of history. Other agents, too, play a role. Creatures who bear the image of God are capable of deciding and acting, and God takes their decisions and actions into account as he determines what course to follow. To a significant extent, then, God's actions are reactions—different ways he responds to what others do as he pursues his ultimate purposes. For the most part, the fulfillment of God's will represents a genuine achievement rather than a foregone conclusion.

■ New Testament Evidence for the Openness of God

Many people see a stark contrast between the New and Old Testament views of God. For most of them, probably, the Old Testament God is stern, harsh and unforgiving, while the New Testament God is loving, forbearing and pliable. To them the New Testament is a helpful corrective, if not an outright reversal, of what the Old Testament says about God. Paradoxically, other people find almost the opposite sort of change from Old to New Testament perspectives. As they see it, the Old Testament God is responsive to human behavior and relatively open in his plans and decisions, whereas the New Testament God is much more rigid. He mapped out the entire course of history in advance, and everything that happens fits into his scheme.

In contrast to both versions of the notion that there is a major shift from Old to New Testament views of God, I believe the New Testament extends and intensifies the dynamic portrait of God we found in the Old. It, too, supports the open view of God.

Jesus' Life and Ministry

Various elements in the New Testament support the idea that God interacts with the creaturely world in a dynamic way. They show that God is aware of, involved in and profoundly affected by human events. This perspective on God is vivid in the accounts of Jesus' life and work, especially in these four elements: the basic concept of the incarnation, the identification of Jesus with God; the general portrayal of God in Jesus' life and ministry; Jesus' specific teachings about God; and finally, the nature of Jesus' death.

The familiar word *incarnation* expresses the idea that Jesus is the definitive revelation of God. According to the central claim of Christian faith—"the Word became flesh" (Jn 1:14)[56]—this particular human life was the most important means God has ever used to reveal himself. The fundamental claim here is not simply that God revealed himself in Jesus, but that God revealed himself in Jesus *as nowhere else.* In this specific human life, as never before or since, nor anywhere else in the sphere of creaturely existence, God expresses his innermost reality. Accordingly, from a Christian standpoint it is appropriate to say not only that *Jesus is God,* but that *God is Jesus.* For Christians, Jesus defines the reality of God.

The incarnation reveals many things about the character of God. The fact that God chose to express himself through the medium of a human life suggests that God's experience has something in common with certain aspects of human experience. If human life in its fullness and complexity, with social, emotional and volitional dimensions, represents the supreme expression of God's own nature among the creatures (Gen 1:26-27), it is reasonable to infer that the distinctive features of human experience are most reminiscent of the divine reality. It would therefore seem that God, like us, is personal existence. If so, then God enjoys relationships, has feelings, makes decisions, formulates plans and acts to fulfill them. Natu-

rally, we may not use the "humanity" of God as a pretext for unbridled speculation, but it clearly points to important similarities between our experience and his.

We learn about God not only from the fact that he assumed human nature but also from the distinctive qualities we see in Jesus. As the Word made flesh, Jesus' life and work represent and correspond to the most important qualities of God himself.

While any attempt to summarize the ministry of Jesus would be presumptuous, an obvious feature is the fact that his life was characterized by *service to* and *suffering with* rather than *power over* human beings. Jesus was acutely sensitive to people's needs and feelings, and he devoted himself to uplifting the poor and the sick. "The Son of Man," as the pivotal text in Mark puts it, "came not to be served but to serve" (Mk 10:45 NRSV). In fact, he explicitly rejected the quest for power over others as inappropriate for his followers (Lk 22:25-26). One of the New Testament letters identifies Jesus with the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:

> Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet 2:21-24)

Through this remarkable portrayal we see the sovereign of the universe as one who reaches to the depths of human need with tenderness and compassion, one who appreciates human sorrows to the fullest.

The Gospels' clearest insights into the nature of God appear in the teachings of Jesus about his heavenly Father, and the most striking element in these teachings is what Jesus says about God's attitude toward sinners. According to the opening verses of Luke 15, the great parables of recovery—the lost sheep, the lost coin, the prodigal son—were intended to illuminate God's attitude toward those the world designates as "sinners." Their message is that God rejoices with the recovery of his lost sons and

daughters. But these parables illuminate this point in a most instructive way.

In each parable, something of great value is lost, and its recovery is the occasion of great excitement. As we all know from personal experience, the thrill of recovery is quite different from the satisfaction of predictable achievement. It is gratifying to achieve a goal you have worked toward; it brings a deep sense of accomplishment. Loss and recovery involve a much wider range of emotions. Losing something of value can inflict enormous pain. We feel the threat of permanent deprivation. The uncertainty as we search or wait to get it back can be agonizing. And then, if we're fortunate, the moment of recovery brings a rush of surprise, relief and joy.

Now the purpose of these parables is to illustrate God's reaction to repentant sinners, and the climax of each parable is the exhilaration of recovery. Jesus says in effect, "Do you know how it feels to lose something you love and then get it back again? That's just how God feels when sinners return to him." These parables thus portray God as one who has a capacity for deep and diverse feelings, who is intimately aware of and keenly sensitive to men and women, and who reacts differently to different situations. In the words of Jesus, "There will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Lk 15:7).

It is worth noting how the poignancy of emotion increases in the last of these three parables. The joy of recovery on the part of the shepherd and the woman is entirely understandable. We can easily imagine ourselves in their position. The joy of the waiting father is different. In contrast to the lost items in the first two parables, the lost son is responsible for his predicament. His headstrong determination to leave home and family, his disdain for his family's values and disregard for his parents' feelings, his outrageous demand for a share of the family estate while his father was living (in effect, wishing his father were dead), his reckless, self-destructive behavior in the far country, even his pathetic, inadequate apology—all these things make it highly unlikely that an ancient Middle Eastern father would receive him, let alone welcome him with open arms.

If the first two parables show us how much like our feelings God's feel-

ings are, the last one discloses a vast difference between them. The wayward son deserves to be rejected. At the least he merits a public rebuke. But instead of humiliating his son, the father humiliates himself by unceremoniously running to him—in full view of curious villagers, no doubt—embracing him, restoring him instantly to his honored position in the family and then even throwing a party to celebrate his return.[57] There is not a trace of recrimination or a hint of resentment in his actions. To rejoice with the return of an irresponsible, insensitive son, rather than turn him away or shower him with reproach, contradicts normal behavior. It reveals a depth of feeling that transcends our natural human emotions. It is actually the vindictive older son, not the father in this story, who displays the natural human response to this situation. He deeply resents what his brother has done and refuses to celebrate his return—just what most of us would do in the same situation. His reaction to his brother's homecoming is entirely understandable. But the joy of the father mystifies us. It is as unexpected as it is profound.[58]

These parables suggest that God's feelings involve a broad spectrum of emotion, and they relate God's experience to ours in a very interesting way. They show us, first, how like and then how unlike ours is God's experience. God's love is like ours in its openness to pain and joy, but his capacity for these experiences is greater than anything of which we are capable.

It is significant that Jesus not only taught what God felt with the sinner's return but in his own actions demonstrated it. In receiving and eating with sinners and social outcasts, he behaved in a manner that conflicted with conventional humanity. And yet precisely here, in his departure from conventional behavior, he most vividly portrayed what God is like. In the words of Adrio König, "Jesus Christ is both the consummation and the explicative history of 'God is love.' "[59]

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. God is like us in being sensitive to the experiences of others, but radically different from us in the profound depth of his feelings. Like traditional theism, the open view of God affirms divine transcendence, the radical

difference between God and all things human. But whereas traditional theism seeks to safeguard God's transcendence by denying divine sensitivity, the open view of God does so by maintaining that his sensitivity and love are infinitely greater than our own.

This is the sort of difference that lies behind the familiar prophetic exclamation, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. . . . As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Is 55:8-9). This is no general affirmation of divine inscrutability, in spite of the use theologians often make of it.[60] It refers specifically to God's willingness to forgive, in contrast to our typical reluctance to do so. "Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts," states the preceding verse. "Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon" (Is 55:7).

The fact that Jesus' life most clearly revealed the nature and character of God has important implications for the Bible's use of anthropological language. When the Scriptures compare God with humanity, the clearest parallels are not between God and fallen human beings, but between God and our essential humanity, specifically Jesus Christ. To draw from König's work again, when the biblical writers deny that God is like human beings, sinful humanity is typically the point of comparison. But when the same writers continue to speak of God in anthropomorphic terms, "it is obvious that it is in another sense that they refer to God as being like man. Here it is intended that the comparison is between God and man as the image of God, and not between God and man as sinner." In particular, "the anthropomorphisms in the Bible represent the proclamation about God in terms of the person and work of Christ."[61] Not only what Jesus taught about God, then, but the way he manifested God in his treatment of people, in particular the undeserving and the unwanted, provides powerful indications that God is deeply sensitive and responsive to human experience.

Jesus' Death

Descriptions of Christ's passion also suggest that God dynamically interacts

with the creaturely world. According to well-known biblical testimony, Jesus' death was the fulfillment of a plan established far in advance. Christ was "chosen before the creation of the world" (1 Pet 1:20) and handed over to his executioners "by God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). The Bible also indicates that Jesus came to a full acceptance of his Father's will through a process of intense spiritual struggle.

The New Testament describes Jesus as engaged in fierce battles with temptation. The letter to the Hebrews asserts that Jesus, our high priest, "has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin" (Heb 4:15). Matthew and Luke vividly recount his temptations in the wilderness following his baptism (Mt 4:1-11; Lk 4:1-13). And, perhaps most important, the Synoptic passion narratives record Jesus' heart-rending pleas on the eve of his crucifixion that he be spared the suffering that lay ahead. "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want" (Mt 26:39 NRSV). According to the Gospels, Jesus reached the point of complete commitment—"Your will be done"—after a period of deep anguish.

The biblical references to Jesus' temptations thus indicate that his moral victory was a genuine achievement, not just a foregone conclusion. He ultimately submitted to God's will while facing tremendous pressure to avoid it. So while God formulated specific plans for Jesus' life, the fulfillment of these plans required Jesus to accept the suffering that God assigned to him. This supports the conclusion that the fulfillment of God's plans for humanity generally requires the cooperation of human agents. It is not something that God's will unilaterally brings about.

The New Testament presents the cross, of course, as the central act in the drama of human salvation. Christ's death is the major concern of all four Gospels, with the passion narratives occupying fully one-third of Mark. As the Gospel of John emphasizes, the cross is the high point in divine revelation as well. For if God was personally present in Jesus, and if the cross was the climactic moment in Jesus' life, it follows that the cross is the supreme moment in the history of God's self-disclosure. According to John, the cross is the place where Jesus' identity is fully known (Jn 12:32-33; cf. 3:14) and where God's name is glorified (Jn 12:27-28). What the cross

reveals is therefore central to the nature of God. Through Calvary we peer, as it were, into the very heart of the divine reality.

What does it reveal about God? We can view the cross both as something God does and as something God experiences. In each case, we find God deeply involved in human life. First of all, it demonstrates that God takes an active role in salvation. The cross is a prominent theme in the writings of Paul, who connects a number of sacrificial terms with Christ's death, including "atonement" (Rom 3:25), "blood" (1 Cor 11:25) and "Passover lamb" (1 Cor 5:7). Using such expressions Paul interprets the cross as an act of reconciliation on God's part. One passage in particular describes it as something that God himself provides:

> God . . . reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. . . . We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. (2 Cor 5:18-20)

This text underscores the central New Testament truth that God is always the subject, and never the object, of reconciliation. He is the agent, not the recipient, of reconciliation. The apostle's call, therefore, is not for sinful human beings to reconcile God, but to be reconciled *to* God, to accept the reconciliation that God freely offers. Clearly, then, the cross was God's action. He was working in Christ to accomplish our reconciliation. Appreciating this fact, many Christian scholars now perceive the suffering of Calvary not as something Jesus offers to God on human behalf, still less as something God inflicts on Jesus (instead of on other human beings), but as the activity of God himself.

Pursuing God's role in reconciliation a step further, we see that the cross is a divine experience as well as a divine action. Humanity and divinity were united in the suffering of Calvary. God was in Christ, himself enduring the agony that Christ underwent. As Kenneth Leech puts it, "It is necessary to see God in the pain and the dying. There must have been a Calvary in the heart of God before it could have been planted on that hill outside . . . Jerusalem."[68]

The idea of a suffering God is the antithesis of traditional divine attributes such as immutability and impassibility. It contradicts the notion that God is immune to transition, to anything resembling the vicissitudes of human experience. To quote Leech again, "The cross is a rejection of the apathetic God, the God who is incapable of suffering, and an assertion of the passionate God, the God in whose heart there is pain, the crucified God."[63] Strange as it seems to some, this idea faithfully reflects the central affirmations of the New Testament concerning God's relation to Jesus. Identifying God with Jesus leads ultimately to the conclusion that what Jesus experienced in the depths of his anguish was experienced by God himself. If the Word truly became flesh, if God was indeed in Christ, then the most significant experience Jesus endured was something God endured as well. The cross is nothing less than the suffering of God himself.

A careful look at the center of Christian faith, the life and death of Jesus, thus supports the idea that God is intimately involved in the creaturely world and experiences it in a dynamic way. He is aware of, involved in and deeply sensitive to human events. His inner life is not static or impassive at all. It surges with powerful emotions.

■ Problem Passages

While impressive biblical evidence supports the openness of God, a number of passages seem to call it into question. Since we are striving for a perspective on God that reflects the broad sweep of biblical testimony, we need to take these into account as well. Can we reconcile the open view of God with the sort of statements we noted earlier to the effect that God never changes, that God can do anything and that God knows everything? And what about the biblical concepts of prophecy, providence and predestination? Can the open view of God accommodate these ideas? As we shall see, the answer is yes. In fact, not only is the open view of God compatible with these important biblical ideas, but they actually support it.[64]

Divine Changelessness

As we saw earlier, the idea of changelessness, or immutability, is central to the traditional view of God. A number of biblical statements seem to support it (see Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17; Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29), and they speak of several ways in which God does not change. One is the fact that, unlike his creatures, the Creator cannot fail to exist. Several texts associated with divine changelessness indicate that God has always existed and will never cease to exist. "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God" (Ps 90:2 NRSV; cf. Ps 9:7). He enjoys unending life, or immortality. He is "the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God" (1 Tim 1:17; cf. 6:16).

Most of the biblical references to divine changelessness pertain to God's character rather than his existence. They assure us that God is completely reliable. He will not be kind and caring one day, spiteful and vengeful the next. He does not promise something only to retract it a moment later. The familiar statement in Malachi, for example, relates God's changelessness to his mercy: "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished" (Mal 3:6 NRSV). Although God's people have been wayward, the prophet proclaims, God's changelessness—his abiding mercy—provides a basis for calling them to return. As one scholar observes, the concern of such statements is really divine faithfulness rather than immutability.[65] The God who "changes not" is not fickle and capricious. His love and care are steadfast. In fact, the most important Hebrew words for God's love carry the meaning of "steadfastness," "loyalty" and "faithfulness."[66]

This is the thrust of two texts that deny that God repents, or changes his mind, Numbers 23:19 and 1 Samuel 15:29.[67] The issue in these verses is the constancy of God's character, not the content of his experience. In both cases, the author's point is that God does not lie, but tells the truth. He does not say one thing while planning to do something else, or make promises with no intention of keeping them. God is changeless in the sense that he is faithful to his word.

As these texts indicate, the Bible clearly supports a concept of divine changelessness. In certain respects God never varies, he is always the same.

The notion that God is changeless is perfectly compatible with the open view of God. In fact, it is just as important to this position as to the conventional alternative. The difference between them is not that one views God as changeless while the other doesn't. The difference is that everything about God must be changeless for the traditional view, whereas the open view sees God as both changeless and changeable.

We can attribute both change and changelessness to God if we apply them to different aspects of his being. God's existence, God's nature and God's character are just as changeless as he could possibly be. These aspects of divinity are completely unaffected by anything else. God would be God no matter what happened in the world. Indeed, God would be God whether the creaturely world existed or not.[68]

When it comes to God's concrete relation to the world, however, the situation is different. God is dynamic in respect to his experience of the creaturely world, his response to what happens in the world, his decisions about what to do in the world and his actions within the world. He is deeply affected by what happens to his creatures.

For the open view, then, God is both changeless and changeable, in distinctly different ways. So while proponents of divine openness emphasize the biblical evidence that God is affected by what happens in the world (suffers) and that he changes his mind (repents), they fully accept the biblical affirmations of divine changelessness. They apply the "changeless" statements to God's existence and character, to his love and reliability. They apply the "changing" statements to God's actions and experience.

Far from creating a conflict in God, these different aspects of divinity are closely related. The reason that God is open to change in some respects is the fact that in other respects he never changes. It is God's nature to love, to love without measure and without interruption. And precisely because this is God's essential nature, he must be sensitive and responsive to the creaturely world. Everything that happens in it has an effect on him. Because God's love *never* changes, God's experience *must* change. In other words, it is part of God's unchanging nature to change.[69]

When we distinguish between God's unchanging nature and his dynamic

experience, we can make sense of a wide range of biblical evidence. We can accept at face value the biblical statements that attribute powerful emotions to God. We do not have to dismiss them as "anthropomorphisms" or "anthropopathisms," which have no application to his real life. The open view of God does justice to a broad spectrum of biblical evidence and allows for a natural reading of the Bible.

In contrast, proponents of the traditional view of God have great difficulty with the many texts that attribute change to God, and they often resort to elaborate measures to avoid their plain import. In the words of one scholar, the response of several influential theologians to biblical assertions of divine repentance is simply "a laboured effort to avoid the obvious meaning of passages."[70] So those who deny that God ever changes have a real problem with texts that indicate that he does, while those who accept the notion that God changes do not face a comparable problem with passages that say that God does not change. By attributing change and changelessness to different aspects of God, proponents of the open view of God achieve a perspective that is both logically consistent and faithful to the full dimensions of the biblical portrait.

An expression often construed as pointing to divine immutability is the name by which God identified himself to Moses in the wilderness, "I AM WHO I AM" (Ex 3:14). In a move widely deplored by biblical and systematic theologians today, Scholastic thinkers interpreted this as a metaphysical statement and applied it to God's being or existence. God thus says to Moses, "I am the self-existent one."[71] It is more in harmony with the biblical view to see this as expressing God's freedom to act and as relating God's identity to his action, since it occurs at an important moment in salvation history—just prior to God's dramatic deliverance of his people from Egypt. Thus, according to Wolfhart Pannenberg, it asserts that God "will show himself in his historical acts."[72] In effect, God says, "I will be there for you."[73] Or, to risk putting it too colloquially, "I am the one you can always count on." At any rate, the text points to the dynamic quality of God's activity rather than to the static quality of the divine nature.

While the biblical writers do affirm respects in which God is changeless,

their primary emphases—in fact, their consistent preoccupation—concern the ways in which God is active within and affected by human history. Accordingly, writes König, "anyone who describes God's being in terms of disengagement, remoteness and self-sufficiency, the ground or origin of all that is, has listened wrongly to the biblical message in general and the preaching of Jesus in particular." To be sure, these aspects do enter the picture. "But they are peripheral concepts, subsidiary matters which do not belong to the discussion of the being of God."[74]

Prophecy

There is no question that prophecy plays a prominent role in the biblical description of God. As the work of the biblical prophets indicates, prophecy involves much more than predicting the future, but this is certainly a part of it, and it is what most of us think of when we hear the word. Many people regard the ability to foretell future events as one of God's distinguishing characteristics.[75] A well-known text seems to indicate this: "I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what it still to come" (Is 46:9-10).

According to traditional theism, God predicts the future on the basis of absolute foreknowledge. He can tell us what lies ahead, because he already sees everything that is going to happen. Familiar examples of prophecy include God's announcement to Moses that he would harden Pharaoh's heart so that he would refuse to let the Israelites leave Egypt (Ex 4:21), and the prediction that Cyrus would help the Jews rebuild Jerusalem (Is 44:28). The Bible contains divine predictions that did not come to pass, of course, but these represent "conditional prophecies," that is, prophecies whose fulfillment depended on certain human responses (which God knew would not occur). The best-known description of conditional prophecy is Jeremiah 18:7-10 (discussed above), and the best-known example of conditional prophecy is Jonah's prediction of Nineveh's downfall (Jon 3:4). According to the traditional view of God, conditional prophecies do not conflict with the notion of absolute foreknowledge, because they were not genuine predictions. Rather, they were the means by which God achieved his purposes. In Jonah's case, for example, getting the Ninevites to repent. God knew that these predictions would not be fulfilled and never intended them to be.[76]

Both Calvinist and Arminian supporters of traditional theism appeal to prophecy to refute the notion that the future is open for God. For Calvinists like Jonathan Edwards, God's knowledge of future human actions and decisions demonstrates that there is no such thing as libertarian freedom.[77] For Arminians, who affirm creaturely freedom, it shows that all free decisions and actions are somehow foreknown by God.[78] For those who espouse the open view of God, predictive prophecy is compatible with genuine creaturely freedom, provided we recognize that there is no simple model that fits all prophecies. Instead, prophecy is a subtle and varied phenomenon, and a divine prediction may represent one of several things.

A prophecy may express God's intention to do something in the future irrespective of creaturely decision. If God's will is the only condition required for something to happen, if human cooperation is not involved, then God can unilaterally guarantee its fulfillment, and he can announce it ahead of time. This seems to be the case with a number of prophecies, including the famous passage in Isaiah. After announcing that he makes known the end from the beginning, God states, "I will do all that I please. . . . What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (Is 46:10-11). Of course, God can predict his own actions.

A prophecy may also express God's knowledge that something will happen because the necessary conditions for it have been fulfilled and nothing could conceivably prevent it. By the time God foretold Pharaoh's behavior to Moses, the ruler's character may have been so rigid that it was entirely predictable. God understood him well enough to know exactly what his reaction to certain situations would be.

A prophecy may also express what God intends to do *if* certain conditions obtain. This is what a conditional prophecy represents—a prediction as to what will happen if human beings behave in one way rather than another. According to Jeremiah 18, prophecies of destruction will not come to pass if people turn from their evil ways, nor will prophecies of blessing be

fulfilled if people disobey. As we have seen, conditional prophecies are better interpreted in the open view of God than in the traditional view. They indicate that God's relation to the creaturely world is one of dynamic interaction. Conditional prophecies express a genuine divine intention. When God had Saul anointed king of Israel, he really intended it to be permanent.

The problem with the traditional view on this point is that there is no *if* from God's perspective. If God knows the future exhaustively, then conditional prophecies lose their integrity. They do not express a genuine divine intention. They are nothing more than hypothetical assertions that God fully knows will never be realized. In the traditional view, Jonah's announcement that Nineveh would be destroyed did not represent something that God really intended to do, since he knew exactly how the Ninevites would respond. It was simply a ploy that produced the desired result.

Most people apply the category of conditional prophecy only to unfulfilled predictions (and regard all fulfilled predictions as indications of absolute foreknowledge). But there is good reason to believe that a number of fulfilled prophecies, like the one concerning Cyrus's aid to the Jews, were conditional too. For example, Jeremiah predicted that the Babylonians would destroy Jerusalem, as in time they did (Jer 32:4; 52:12-14), so the prophecy was fulfilled. Jeremiah also predicted that the city would be spared if Zedekiah would surrender instead of holding out (Jer 38:17-18). If the latter was a conditional prophecy, which seems obvious, then so was the former. It, too, depended on certain conditions that might or might not have obtained.

Instead of posing a problem to the open view of God, therefore, the phenomenon of prophecy actually supports it. In light of the full range of biblical predictions, we see God sometimes acting on his own within the world, but more often interacting with creatures whose behavior is not entirely predictable—not even by him. God told Jeremiah, "I thought that after [Israel] had done all this she would return to me but she did not" (Jer 3:7). " 'I thought you would call me "Father" and not turn away from following me. But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you have

been unfaithful to me, O house of Israel,' declares the LORD" (Jer 3:19-20). So the typical prophecy expresses God's intentions to act a certain way, depending on what his creatures decide to do.

Foreknowledge and Predestination

For many who see prophecy as evidence that the future is entirely foreseeable to God, biblical expressions such as "foreknowledge" and "predestination" indicate that God determines the entire course of history, or at least substantial portions of it. A number of biblical words convey the idea that God chooses, wills or ordains certain things to occur, sometimes as long ago as the origin of the world. Although God occasionally planned seemingly mundane things in advance, such as the building of a reservoir in Jerusalem (Is 22:11), most of what he planned relates to the history of salvation. Christ, for example, was "chosen before the creation of the world" (1 Pet 1:20) and handed over to his executioners "by God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23; cf. 4:27-28).

Similarly, God's people are the object of divine calling, foreknowledge and predestination. God's elect "have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Pet 1:2). God chose us in Christ "before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will" (Eph 1:4-5). In a famous passage Paul speaks of those who "have been called according to his purpose": "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son. . . . And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified" (Rom 8:28-30).

From time to time the Bible also indicates that certain individuals had very specific roles to play in fulfilling God's plan. God called Abraham to leave his country, promising to make of him a great nation through whom all peoples on earth would be blessed (Gen 12:1-2). His covenant included giving Abraham's descendants the land of Canaan (Gen 15:18-19). God preferred Jacob to Esau (Gen 25:23; Rom 9:10-13). He told Jeremiah that he had been appointed to be a prophet "before I formed you in the womb

. . . before you were born" (Jer 1:5).

On the negative side, those who oppose God also serve his purposes. God used Pharaoh to magnify his power: "I have raised you up for this very purpose, that I might show you my power and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth" (Ex 9:16). The writer of Exodus attributed the hardness of Pharaoh's heart both to God ("I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go" [Ex 4:21]) and to the monarch himself ("Pharaoh hardened his heart" [Ex 8:32]). He also stated that Pharaoh sinned in hardening his heart (Ex 9:34). Similarly, the New Testament speaks of Judas' betrayal of Jesus as a fulfillment of prophecy. Quoting Psalm 41:9, Jesus said, "This is to fulfill the scripture: 'He who shares my bread has lifted up his heel against me' " (Jn 13:18). He also said, "None has been lost except the one doomed to destruction so that Scripture would be fulfilled" (Jn 17:12). Following Jesus' ascension Peter told the believers, "the Scripture had to be fulfilled which the Holy Spirit spoke long ago through the mouth of David concerning Judas, who served as guide for those who arrested Jesus" (Acts 1:16).

Are these accounts of foreknowledge and predestination compatible with the open view of God? Or do they require us to conclude that the future is entirely foreseen by him and to a significant extent, if not entirely, determined by him? The first thing to bear in mind is the wide range of biblical testimony. In addition to the sort of passages just noticed, which speak of God's plans being fulfilled, numerous passages (including a number already examined) indicate that this is not always the case. To cite a general example, the Bible asserts that God does not want "anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Pet 3:9); he "wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:4; cf. Tit 2:11). Yet it appears that not all will be saved. According to Jesus' statement, all of the dead will come back to life—"those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation" (Jn 5:29 NRSV). Other passages indicate that some human beings set themselves against God for eternity (Mt 21:41-46; Rev 20:14-15; cf. Mt 7:13-14). In this important respect, then, God's will does not guarantee the outcome that he desires.

The same seems to be true in more specific cases as well. According to Isaiah's beautiful song of the vineyard, the Lord did everything he could to ensure the prosperity of his chosen people, only to be bitterly disappointed: "he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress" (Is 5:7). On the individual level, too, God's plans are often thwarted. King Saul's behavior is a clear example.

Even when God's plans are fulfilled, there are often indications that things might have turned out otherwise. Some of the greatest prophets were reluctant to accept God's call. Moses offered up a long series of excuses before finally agreeing to return to Egypt as God's representative (Ex 3—4). Jeremiah felt too young for the responsibility (Jer 1:6). Could Moses or Jeremiah have rejected God's call? Nothing in the biblical accounts rules out that possibility.

But what about the specific predictions concerning individual behavior? What about the hardness of Pharaoh's heart, Judas' betrayal of Jesus and Peter's denial, for that matter? All of them fulfilled predictions and the first two, at least, seemed to be part of a prior plan. Was their occurrence therefore inevitable? Not necessarily. It is logically possible that they represent conditional prophecies. In the case of Peter's denial this seems especially likely, since Jesus had prayed that his faith would not fail (Lk 22:32). We have already remarked on Pharaoh's behavior. By the time the prediction was made, his character may have been so fixed that his response to Moses' request was a foregone conclusion. It may also be that he actually could have responded positively when he first received the request, even though he denied it, but then became increasingly resistant as time went by until his refusal was adamant.[79] While Judas's behavior fulfilled prophecy (Ps 41:9), it is possible the prophecy in question could have found fulfillment in some other way. After all, the Gospels tell us that "all the disciples deserted him and fled" (Mt 26:56; cf. Mk 14:50).

The traditional view of foreknowledge and predestination draws broader conclusions than the evidence warrants in three important ways. The fact that God foreknows or predestines something does not guarantee that it will

happen, the fact that God determines part of history does not mean that he determines all of history, and the fact that God extends a specific call to certain people does not mean that he similarly calls all people.

First, although certain things did (and do) happen in harmony with divine predestination, this does not mean that these events could not possibly have failed to occur. As we have seen, the Bible clearly indicates that God has often experienced disappointment and frustration.

Second, it may be true that God occasionally acts by fiat and directly causes something to happen. Yet even if he determines one event, it does not necessarily follow that he determines all events. If God wants something specific to happen—say, the parting of the Red Sea—and his power alone is a sufficient condition of its occurring, then he can bring it about entirely on his own initiative. Where human decision is presupposed, however, God cannot achieve his objectives unilaterally. He requires our cooperation. Endowing creatures with significant freedom means that God gave them the ability to decide a good deal of what occurs. Consequently, the actual course of history is not something God alone decides all by himself. God and the creatures both contribute.[80] So even though some things happen as a direct result of divine action, this is not true of everything that happens.

Third, the concept of calling does not imply that God directly decides the eternal destiny of each human being. In fact, we misunderstand the biblical notion of calling, or election, if we think it applies either primarily to individuals or primarily to ultimate human destiny. Throughout the Bible divine election typically represents a corporate call to service.[81] It applies to groups rather than to individuals, and it involves a role in God's saving work in the present world rather than in the future life (although this may be an extension of the former). There were specific calls to individuals, of course. It was characteristic of prophets and apostles to be directly called to their work (see Gal 1:1). But in certain cases calls to individuals were really calls to the groups they represented. This was true of Abraham and Jacob, for example. In calling them, God was in effect calling their descendants, the "children of Israel."

An extensive survey of biblical references to election and foreknowledge leads William W. Klein to similar conclusions.[82] He finds that biblical election is fundamentally a corporate category. It pertains primarily to groups, not to the individuals who make up the group. "Plural language dominates [New Testament] election texts," he writes, creating "the overwhelming impression—in keeping with the Old Testament pattern of a chosen people—that God has chosen the church as a body rather than the specific individuals who populate that body."[83] Similarly, the central point of predestination is the goals God sets for his people as a whole, "not the selection of who will become his people."[84] And when God's call does focus on specific individuals, it represents a summons to service, not a guarantee of personal salvation. He appoints them to "perform tasks, functions, or ministries in his service."[85]

Conclusion

What kind of God created the world? What kind of world did God create? As with any important inquiry, the portrait of God's relation to the world that emerges from the Bible depends heavily on the angle of vision from which we approach it. Assuming that the supreme Monarch exercises complete control over the reality he created, and that its entire past and future lie perpetually before him, proponents of the traditional view of God find support in the biblical affirmations of divine changelessness and in biblical notions like prophecy and election. They emphasize biblical statements to the effect that God never changes, that he does whatever he chooses, and that he knows the future in detail. And they typically construe accounts of divine suffering and divine repentance as literary inventions, figures of speech that are not to be taken literally.

Our objective in this discussion has been to explore the scriptural evidence for the open view of God. If we shift our angle of vision in light of some powerful biblical themes, a quite different portrait of God emerges. A number of important ideas converge in the view that God's experience is open and that his relation to the creaturely world is one of dynamic interaction. The most fundamental of them is divine love, God's unswerving

commitment to the welfare of his creatures and his profound sensitivity to their experiences. We find the clearest manifestation of this love in the life and ministry of Jesus, the Word become flesh who shares our human lot with us. We also see it throughout the history of creation and salvation that preoccupies the writers of the Bible. We see it in the biblical accounts of God's inner life—in his actions, decisions and, perhaps most vividly, in his feelings.

Various passages reveal a God who is deeply involved in human experience. The failings of his human children disappoint him and their sufferings bring him grief, but he seeks their companionship and rejoices when they return his love. These passages also reveal a God who is active within human history, patiently pursuing his objectives for his creatures, while taking into account their decisions and actions. They show that God adjusts and alters his plans to accommodate changes in human behavior.

The view of God proposed in this book thus rests on a broad spectrum of biblical evidence. A host of biblical themes support the openness of God.

2 Historical Considerations

John Sanders

Why do we not usually read the Bible in the way suggested in the previous chapter? After all, many of us do read the Bible initially as saying that God responds to us and may change his mind, but once we become more "theologically informed" we tend to reinterpret those texts in a way that does not allow for such theologically "incorrect" views. Where does this "theologically correct" view of God come from? The answer, in part, is found in the way Christian thinkers have used certain Greek philosophical ideas. Greek thought has played an extensive role in the development of the traditional doctrine of God. But the classical view of God worked out in the Western tradition is at odds at several key points with a reading of the biblical text as given in chapter one. In the classical tradition the prima facie meaning of the texts cited in favor of the openness of God is commonly overturned in favor of another interpretation. The task of this chapter is to explain how this turn of events came about.

The answer, as I see it, lies in an understanding of the cultural framework within which the early church developed its view of God. The early church fathers lived in the intellectual atmosphere where Greek philosophy (especially middle Platonism) dominated. Scholars customarily describe the Christian use of Greek philosophy as the "Hellenization" of Christian theology. Yet we must acknowledge that what transpired was just as much the Christianization of Hellenism as Christian writers, brought up in the