

Open Theism as a Christian Paradigm:
Situating Open Theology within Evangelicalism

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1. Introduction

While the traditional understanding of omniscience claims that God possesses divine foreknowledge, it will be argued that open theism presents a stronger case for the nature of God. Christians must examine the relational dynamic shared between God and humans that is revealed in Scripture. Therefore, Scripture needs to be brought into question and as a result, Christians must use reason, tradition, and experience to better understand the God revealed in Scripture. In this paper, I will address the following topics: The traditional view of Scripture and the image of God this interpretation has produced; I will then assert passages from an open view of God and this interpretation and establish the uncertainty of Scripture; next I will examine the logical understanding of the open view for God; finally, I will situate open theology within evangelical Christianity. Therefore, an analysis of Scripture and reason combined will reveal a relational God who is influenced by human decision making and contains an open view of the universe in line with evangelical Christianity.

The destiny of human action cannot be known by God for certain. The traditional Christian view has assumed God's sovereign omnipotence and omniscience over creation, with claims rooted in Scripture. In this view, God possesses divine foreknowledge—knowing all that has happened, is happening, and will happen in the future. However, this understanding of omnipotence and omniscience leads to unilateral control, resulting in debilitating effects on God's divine characteristics. Christians claim to believe in an omnibenevolent God who cares for his creation in an intentional, and specific way. The traditional understanding claims the God revealed in Scripture possess divine foreknowledge and divine sovereignty over creation. As a result, how does a God who is omnibenevolent, and knows the future of human action, create the reality in which humans currently live? The more important question is whether this idea is

faithful to the overall biblical portrait of God. Given these ideas, both the traditional view of Scripture and the open view will need to be further explored.

2. Reinterpreting Scripture

2.1 Traditional View

The traditional view of Christianity has provided an understanding of God's omniscience most commonly supported through biblical interpretation. In this view, God is considered to possess simple foreknowledge. Simple foreknowledge, often associated with Calvinism, is a view where God knows everything that will happen because he has chosen what is to occur and thus brings it about.¹ Subsequently, God's divine omniscience is the cause of all things. Furthermore, this view is supported by early Patristic and Medieval theologians. For instance, St. Augustine says, "For to confess that God exists, and at the same time deny that he has foreknowledge of future things, is the most manifest folly... For one who is not prescient of all future things is not God."² The traditional view is more thoroughly explained in Calvin's thoughts:

When we attribute foreknowledge to God, we mean that all things were, and perpetually remain, under his eyes, so that to his knowledge there is nothing future or past, but all things are present. And they are present in such a way that he not only conceives them through ideas, as we have before us those things which our minds remember, but he truly looks upon them and discerns them as things placed before him. And this knowledge is extended throughout the universe to every creature.³

¹ Erickson, Millard J. *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?: The Current Controversy over Divine Foreknowledge*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003. Print. 12.

² Beilby, James K., Paul R. Eddy, and Gregory A. Boyd. *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001. Print. 69. Also, and in relation to St. Augustine, Hunt also quotes, Justin Martyr, Boethius, St. Anselm, and St. Thomas Aquinas, all in support of the tradition view of omniscience.

³ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III. XXI. 5, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). 2: 926.

In this quote, John Calvin presents the lens by which Scripture is commonly interpreted. This view of God, even when attested by other theologians, can provide support through many biblical passages. The following section of this paper will explore key passages supporting God's unquestionable foreknowledge of the future.

2.1.1 Isaiah 41:21-24

This passage of Scripture is one of the classic texts indicating God's foreknowledge:

Set fourth your case, says the Lord bring your proofs says King of Jacob. Let them bring them, and tell us what is to happen. Tell us the former things, what they are, so that we may consider them, and that we may know their outcome; or declare to us the thing to come. Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified. You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all; whoever chooses you is an abomination. (Isa. 41:21-24)

In this passage, God is directly challenging the idolaters to make a case for their idols. The general challenge is for the idols to tell us what is going to happen (v. 22). The text then shows us how God exercises divine foreknowledge in two ways: by establishing things which have previously happened, and their outcomes. Not only is God challenging idols to make sense of history, but challenging them to foretell the future by understanding the past. The ability to control the flow of events for a predication reaches fulfillment is a true sign of being God (v.23). Within this passage, Isaiah is attempting to reveal an aspect of God's character; the beginning of things could not be found by human nature, not even natures that are more divine than humans, the Lord is above all other gods.⁴ What distinguishes God apart from creation is the fact that only God can foreknow the future, and control the flow of events so that what he knows comes to fruition.

⁴ Motyer, J. A. *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction & Commentary*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993. Print. 315.

Furthermore, in this story, God continues to make challenge with the idols and establish his own character. In chapter 41:25-29, the Lord affirms how he has acted, based upon his previous questions directed towards the idols. What is most interesting is the following passage which seems to suggest the continued theme in Isaiah of God's foreknowledge:

Remember this and consider, recall it to mind, you transgressors, remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other 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," calling a bird of prey from the east, the man for my purpose from a far country. I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it. (Isa. 46:8-11)

In this passage, God is placing emphasis on his ability to bring about the intended purposes of his plan based on his prior workings in Israel's relationship with God. In this passage, the verb (זכר) *zakar*, which means to remember, involves far more than merely intellectual contemplation, but includes the active response commensurate with the past experience of what God has already done.⁵ Even though this passage seems to easily point towards God's foreknowledge, an open theist interpretation should also be acknowledged. Greg Boyd suggests:

The Lord is not appealing to information about the future he happens to possess; instead, he is appealing to his own intentions about the future. He foreknows his own purpose and intention to bring these events about. Nothing in the text requires that we believe everything that will ever come to pass will do so according to his will and thus is settled ahead of time.⁶

Proponents of foreknowledge suggest Isaiah 46:8-11 reveal God's foreknowledge because he is bringing about his intended results. However, open theists attest this interpretation because foreknowledge cannot be adequately deduced from the text. The text is only stating the future is determined and settled only to the extent of what God's actions will be. In other words, the text

⁵ Childs, Brevard S. *Isaiah*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001. Print. 361.

⁶ Boyd, Gregory A. *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000. Print. 30.

is only indicating what God is going to do, and not God's knowledge in relationship of all human action and contingencies.

2.1.2 Psalm 139:4-6, 13-16

Even if proponents for divine foreknowledge concede that Isaiah 46:8-11 directly indicates that God has future knowledge of human action, Psalm 139 also does the same. In the following verses, God appears to share an all knowing and intimate relationship with the Psalmist:

Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is to wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it. (Ps. 139:4-6 NRSV)

This passage indicates that God knows the Psalmist intimately. Knowing what the psalmist would say before he even had the thoughts to say leads to God's divine foreknowledge. The Hebrew word (יָדָעַ) *yada*, which means to know, occurs seven times in this psalm. The verbal root covers a whole range of meanings—from simple recognition to an intimate sexual relationship. God knows all there is about the psalmist, inside and out—every detail of the daily routine and every unspoken thought.⁷

As readers continue examining the psalm, God's foreknowledge becomes even clearer.

Verses 13-16 are as follows:

For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.

⁷ DeClaisselle-Walford, Nancy L., Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner. *The Book of Psalms*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2014. Print. 964.

As previously established, this section reveals God's intimate relationship with humanity and his divine foreknowledge pertaining to them. In verse 13, the Psalmist indicated God's intimate involvement with Him while he was in the womb. God understands the Psalmist, even within the extreme complexity of coming into existence.

Furthermore, verse 16 illustrates God's knowledge of the future. The context of this message is in relation to everything being in the past. The verb formed, in Hebrew is (יָצַר) *yatsar*, which, when applied to humans, denotes the forming of an idea or plan. When applied to divine activity, or divine purpose, *yatsar* refers only to God and means "pre-ordained (in the divine purpose)" of God's plan.⁸ Overall, the intended purpose of this passage is to illustrate how God knows the future actions of humans and has a specific plan for their future.

Open theists will be quick to attest the interpretation of Psalm 139. Biblical scholar John Sanders presents the following idea in response to verse 4, "This may be explained by divine foreknowledge or by God knowing the psalmist so well that he can "predict" what he will say and do."⁹ The text does not necessitate an understanding of divine foreknowledge. There are no specific or all-inclusive words pointing towards foreknowledge. If there was, verse 4 would look something like this, "Every time a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you always know it completely."

2.1.3 Mathew 26:33-35

Moving forward into the New Testament, proponents for divine foreknowledge point to the Gospels for support. Mathew 25:33-35 states:

⁸ Erickson. *What Does God Know?* 41-2.

⁹ Sanders, John. *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007. Print. 130.

Peter said to him, “Though all become deserters because of you, I will never desert you.” Jesus said to him, “Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times.” Peter said to him, “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And so said all the disciples.

This statement is a very specific prediction of human action on behalf of God. Bruce Ware asserts an interesting argument in favor of divine foreknowledge regarding this passage, stating: “In the open view, Jesus could not have known any of these specifics. Honestly, I am simply incredulous that the proposal would be made that Jesus could accurately predict that Peter would deny him three times, based on God’s perfect knowledge of Peter’s character.”¹⁰ God could only make this claim if he had foreknowledge of future events. There are too many contingencies in place which had to fit together perfectly, for this event to take place in the way it did. The prediction of what Peter would do involved not only the knowledge of Peter’s character but also that of several other persons whose action bore upon the outcome of the incident. Since God does allow free choices, and since he cannot foreknow free human actions, it would seem to require a lot of intervention from God to fulfill his prophecy, too much for the open view.¹¹

However, God may not necessarily need to know the future in order make these claims. God intimately knows Peter better than Peter knows himself. Boyd asserts, “We do not know how much, if any, supernatural intervention was behind the scenes that evening. But the outcome was just as God anticipated.”¹² This text does not necessitate an understanding of God who knows the future of human action exhaustively. A critical reading of the text also reveals the possibility that God can possess perfect knowledge of the past and the present, and that God could possibly act in some way, to bring about his prediction.

¹⁰ Ware, Bruce A. *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000. Print. 128.

¹¹ Erickson. *What Does God Know*. 53.

¹² Ibid. 52.

Overall, I have used Scripture to assert God's divine foreknowledge according to the traditional interpretation. First, I have examined Isaiah 41:21-24, showing how God challenges idols to predict future events in the same way he does. Secondly, I examined Psalm 139:4-6 and 13-16, attempting to show how God has pre-ordained certain individual for certain events since before we are created. Thirdly, I have shown that God does know the future of human action for certain when he predicts Peter's actions in Mathew 26:33-35. However, I also briefly provided an explanation from the open view for these passages. In order to further challenge the traditional interpretation of Scripture and show its uncertainty, I will provide more detailed interpretations from the open view.

2.2 Open View

After providing a traditional interpretation of Scripture which depicts a God who is all knowing and unilaterally in control of creation, I will now assert different perspectives from the open view. Readers can come to an open understanding of God by studying how his character is revealed. Starting with the Old Testament, readers can interact with a God who possesses feelings such as love, joy, anger, regret, and frustration. This language is used by humans to describe God's divine reality. These human qualities attributed to God provide us with a holistic and biblical foundation to an understanding of God's nature and how he interacts with humans. Understanding God's divine reality is essential for one's belief in a relational God. For Christians, it is not enough to say that God is the one who saves and blesses, but what is

important is the type of God who is saving. Even a capricious or impersonal God can save and bless.¹³

The most important and fundamental attribute given to God is love, which is essential to understanding the open view 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.¹⁴ Love not only within the Trinitarian relationship; but God's love shared with creation and human's love with one another. God cannot help but to love and God's nature of love is labeled *agape* love in the New Testament. As Anders Nygren asserts *agape* is God's own love spontaneously flowing to all creatures, not by reason of their worth or merit, not moved by any gain for himself, but coming freely from his boundless generosity."¹⁵ The attribute of love cannot be separated from who God is and how he interacts with the world. In Karl Barth's words regarding love, "All our further insights about who and what God is must revolve round this mystery—the mystery of his love. A doctrine of God that is faithful to the Bible must show that all of God's characteristics derive from love."¹⁶ Therefore; according to Scripture, all of God's characteristic and interactions with creation in this paper must be interpreted through the lens of love.

2.2.1 Old Testament: Jonah

The book of Jonah provides a unique understanding of God's inner reality. Jonah is commissioned by God to prophesy in Nineveh. The people of Nineveh had become overcome by

¹³ Fretheim, Terence E. *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984. Print. 24.

¹⁴ Pinnock, Clark H., Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994. Print. 19.

¹⁵ Johnson, Paul E. *Christian Love*. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1951. Print. 24.

¹⁶ Barth, Karl, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Thomas F. Torrance. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. 2. Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962. Print. Ser. 2. 283-84.

evil and God's judgement was to be brought upon them. Jonah exclaimed, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown."¹⁷ This verse reveals a divine imperative, God has decided to judge Nineveh for their evilness. In response to Jonah's prophecy, Nineveh repents their evil ways and seeks God's forgiveness. The author reveals an interesting relational dynamic when he states:

Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish. When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon the; and he did not do it.¹⁸

The people of Nineveh and God share an interesting relationship which is often overlooked. The phrase "who knows" prefaces the theology with possibility and uncertainty.¹⁹ Within the Ninevites unknowingness, they had hope for compassion in God, who would alter his actions in response to theirs.

God response defies the traditional interpretation of God's character. The text claims, in response to the Ninevites, God changes his mind about the judgement which was to be brought upon them. In both verses, the Hebrew word (שׁוּב) *shub* is used to describe the actions of God and the Ninevites. The same word is used when other prophets proclaim repentance to Israel. *Shub* is a word which not only evokes a certain movement and action but calls the object to participate in the expression of this action. Naturally, one should not understand this statement as though everything must return to the old state but rather that "such a 'return' (constitutes) only the starting point for a completely new beginning."²⁰ Since *shub* is a word rooted in action, the

¹⁷ John 3:4. NRSV.

¹⁸ Jon 3:9-10. NRSV.

¹⁹ Keck, Leander E. *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books in Twelve Volumes*. Vol. 7. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996. Print. 514.

²⁰ Jenni, Ernst and Claus Westermann. *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Vol. 3. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1997. Print. 1315.

repentance of both humans and God affect one another. The Ninevites are moved into action through fear of God's judgement and hope for his compassion. Subsequently, God is moved into action, changing his original intent for judgment, because of the Ninevites repentance.

To gain a better understanding of God's nature and his relationship with humanity, attention must also be given to Jonah's response to God after Nineveh repents. After Nineveh repents and God decides to relent, Jonah becomes angry and displeased. He responds:

Lord! Is not this what I said while I was still in my own country? That is why I fled to Tarsish at the beginning; for I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing. (Jon. 4:2)

In this short verse, Jonah lists the characteristics which have always been used to define God which this story also represents. One of the essential characteristics of this narrative show how repentance of the Lord, as the prophet confesses it, in connection with the proclamation of the name, means that the God of Israel is inclined to save his enemies rather than destroy them.²¹ Jonah can only make such a claim based on his prior experience and knowledge of God. As a result, readers must also examine other scenarios where God changes his mind and how the history of interpretation addresses this characteristic.

2.2.2 Exodus 32

Another biblical example of God's dynamic relationship with humanity is revealed in Exodus 32. In this writing, Moses is engaging in conversation with the Lord. Similar to the book of Jonah, God desires to enact judgement. However, this judgement is not directed towards Nineveh but his chosen people, the Israelites. In response to Israel turning away from the Lord,

²¹ Cary, Phillip. *Jonah*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2008. Print. 134.

God's tell Moses to warn his people that, "I have seen this people, how stiff necked they are.

Now let me, so that my wrath may burn against them and I may consume them; and of you I will make a great nation" (Ex. 32:9-10). In response to God's judgement, Moses petitions on behalf on Israel. In one of the most petitionary and dynamic prayers in all of Scripture Moses says:

O Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth'? Turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, "I Will multiple your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever. (Ex. 32:11-13)

Moses' prayer and his relationship with God provides insight into God's divine nature. First, readers must understand that Moses already has an idea of God's nature. The act of petitioning with God itself, implies that Moses believes in the possibility of God changing his mind. Thus, Moses uses his understanding of God and His previous actions with Israel in his petition. Moses does not excuse the people for their sins but rather presents the question, "why save Israel, then destroy the people?"²²

Secondly, the appeal of Moses for God to change His mind is based off His reputation to the Egyptians. The claim, "Why should the Egyptians say, it was with evil intent that he brought them out to kill them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth" (v.12), suggests the destruction of Israel will conflict with God's nature through the perspective of the Egyptians. If God decided to enact his wrath against Israel, then the Egyptians would have seen a God who saved his people and then destroyed them. God is not only concerned about displaying his power, but is also concerned to make known what kind of God he is. Moses' appeal is based

²² Hamilton, Victor P. *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011. Print 538. Hamilton also explains how this idea is shown in the retelling of the story in Deuteronomy. The central focus of his argument is how Moses' appeal is entirely directed to God and his character.

upon the premise that the Lord seeks to make himself known as a God who is both powerful and good.²³

Thirdly, examining the language is imperative for understanding God's nature reflected in this passage. In the phrase, "turn from your fierce wrath; change your mind and do not bring disaster on your people" (v12), contains the same Hebrew word, *shub*, as contained in Jonah. This characteristic seems to be a consistent theme within the Old Testament understanding of God. When the word *shub* is used in relation to God and human petition, it is referring to an actual changing of God's mind. This idea is the understanding of Ps. 106:23, "So he said he would destroy them— had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him to keep his wrath from destroying them." Thus, Moses' petition for Israel had an impact on God's decision to bring about his wrath or not.

Fourthly, the history of interpretation for this passage asserts the idea of God changing his mind to be in line with his character. Jewish tradition focuses on the relationship shared between the Lord and Moses, and how this relationship reflects God's character. The following passage is an excerpt from a Jewish commentary:

As such, it is a tactic comment on Moses' extraordinary character. At the same time, it implies that such intercession can be effective. Thus, it is also a statement about the nature of God: He is responsive to human entreaty. Intercession before God on behalf of man is an indispensable aspect of the prophetic role.²⁴

This claim is referring to verse 10, "Now, let Me be, that my anger may blaze fourth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation," which prompts Moses' intercession. The God revealed in the Old Testament, as supported by Jewish scholarship,

²³ Blackburn, W. Ross. *The God Who Makes Himself Known: The Missionary Heart of the Book of Exodus*. Downers Grove, IL: Apollos, 2012. Print. 171.

²⁴ Potok, Chaim, Nahum M. Sarna, Jacob Milgrom, and Jeffrey H. Tigay. *The JPS Torah Commentary: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989. Print. 205.

exhibits a dynamic relationship with humanity. Human prayers matter to God. Not only does God have the power to influence humans, but humans also have the capacity to influence God through prayer.

Lastly, this story must be compared to a similar situation which happened in Ezekiel. In chapter 22, God brings judgement on the people of Israel precisely because there was no one to stand up against God on their behalf. The text in states:

The people of the land have practiced extortion and committed robbery; they have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I would not destroy it; but I found no one. Therefore, I have poured out my indignation upon them; I have consumed them with the fire of my wrath; I have returned their conduct upon their heads, says the Lord God. (Eze. 22:29-31)

In this passage, the same type of situation is happening between God and Israel as it does in Exodus 32. The people of Israel have turned against the ways of God and he brings this rebellion to their attention. Not only this, but the same language of wrath being brought upon Israel is also used. In this passage, the Lord says that an intercessor on behalf of Israel would have been effective, and a lack thereof evoked judgement. We cannot claim that prayer is beneficial without conceding that the lack of prayer is harmful.²⁵ Unfortunately, in the situation we read about in Ezekiel, there was no intercessor like Moses to be found.

Overall, the relationship between God and Moses is dynamic. Passages like Exod. 32:12,14, remind the reader that God does not always operate unilaterally. He is a God who listens to our prayers, takes what we have to say seriously, and often adjusts his attentions.²⁶ Thus far, an open view for God through the Old Testament has been established. To bring the open view in line with Christian tradition, the New Testament must also be investigated. By

²⁵ Boyd, Gregory A. *Is God to Blame?: Moving beyond Pat Answers to the Problem of Evil*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003. Print. 127.

²⁶ Hamilton. *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*. 540.

examining the New Testament, the relational dynamic of God revealed in the Old Testament will be intensified.

2.2.3 New Testament: Incarnation

When attempting to understand the inner reality of God, understanding the revelation of God through Jesus Christ is imperative. Scripture tells us that “the word became flesh” (Jn. 1:14), pointing towards God actualizing himself as a human. The fundamental claim here is not simply that God revealed himself in Jesus, but that God revealed himself in Jesus and nowhere else.²⁷ Readers can identify a God who has become human, not to have power over them, but to serve them (Mk. 10:45). Furthermore, Christ is showed to have suffered on behalf and with humanity, leaving behind a set of steps to follow in (1 Pet. 2: 21). Brian Hebblethwaite provides a sound lens for viewing the incarnation:

According to the doctrine of the Incarnation, the man Jesus cannot be thought apart from his being God incarnate. Or rather, so to think of him is to abstract from the full reality of what was taking place at that time in history. Jesus was not just a particularly good man whom God decided to adopt. Rather the whole story of God’s relation to the world is to be seen as pivoted round his personal presence and action here in our midst in Jesus Christ.²⁸

Therefore, readers must closely analyze Christ not as just an example to live by, but also to gain insight into God’s divine character. God reveals himself and relates to us in a particular way, and this revelation occurs through God becoming human. Through the incarnation, God is giving us personal knowledge of himself.

The incarnation reveals different characteristics of God. Since God revealed himself through a human, Christians must pay close attention to the expression of God through Christ’s

²⁷ Pinnock. *The Openness of God*. 39.

²⁸ Hebblethwaite, Brian. *The Incarnation: Collected Essays in Christology*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987. Print. 22.

character. God choosing to reveal himself as a human, and nothing else, seems to suggest a commonality between divine and human experience. With the complexity of human life, its social interactions, thoughts, and emotions, the life of Christ also reflects divine complexity. The incarnation reveals God's desire to connect on a deeply intimate and relational level. The following passage from Scripture reveals God's desire to connect with humanity:

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet. 2:21-24)

While any attempt to summarize the entirety of Jesus' ministry would be presumptuous, an obvious feature in the above passage of Scripture is the fact that his life was characterized by service to, and suffering with, rather than power over human beings.²⁹ God is a being who deeply cares about human desire and suffering. He reveals himself through Jesus to relate with humanity, showing that he is not disconnected from humanities affairs in the earthly realm and he appreciates human sorrows to the fullest. God relates to humanity by revealing himself through Jesus and actualizing the human experience for himself. Therefore, the incarnation ought to provide the clearest insight into the nature of God and build creditability for the revelation of this character through Jesus.

2.2.4 Luke 15

Since I have established how the character of God is revealed through Christ, we can now examine how Christ interacts with humanity on behalf of God's character. In the Gospel of Luke,

²⁹ Pinnock. *The Openness of God*. 40.

chapter 15, Jesus teaches three different parables for the purpose of explaining the innermost feelings of God. In these parables, Christ reveals a God who rejoices in those who repent. In response to lost sheep who has been found, or Christians whom have turned away from God, Jesus says, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (Lk. 15:7). Furthermore, Jesus reiterates this idea in the parable of the lost coin stating, “there is Joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents” (Lk. 15:10).

In these parables, Jesus is attempting to use human emotion to describe the nature of God. In the same way humans rejoice over finding lost items, or that which has importance to them, so too does God rejoice when humans return to his embrace. Jesus says in effect, “Do you know how it feels to lose something you love and then to get it back again? That is just how God feels when sinners return to him.”³⁰ God has the capacity to deeply rejoice at the repentance of sinners. These two parables help to define the character of God and the mission of Jesus. In presenting God and Jesus as searching for sinners, they also require the Lukan audience to show a similar concern and to rejoice when the lost return to God’s people.³¹

Readers must be careful not to attribute the exactness of human emotion to the divine reality of God. If the first two parables show us how much alike our feelings and God’s feelings are, the last one discloses vast differences between them.³² In this parable, readers see a son who ought to be rejected. The younger son had squandered his property and spent everything he had received from his father (Lk. 15:13-14). Instead of rejecting his son, the father takes all humiliation upon himself. In 15:20, the phrase “ran to his son and threw is arms around him” is

³⁰ Pinnock. *The Openness of God*. 41.

³¹ Tannehill, Robert C. *Luke*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1996. Print. 239. See a further explanation in pgs. 236-239. Here, Tannehill provides a detailed description of how these parables point to a God who is affected by human action.

³² Pinnock. *The Openness of God*. 41-42.

explained to mean: “Throwing aside oriental behavioral conventions, Jesus has the father run to his son in order to show God’s love, joy, and eagerness to receive outcasts and then threw his arms around him to show God’s loving acceptance.”³³ This response reveals a depth of feeling which is unlike normal human behavior. Similarly, we can compare the elder son as the one who exhibits the natural human response.

God’s love for humans is deeply profound, his feelings involve a broad spectrum of emotion. Scripture can reveal how human emotions are similar and differ from God’s experience. In the same way humans have an open capacity to experience different emotions, so too does God. Some of the emotions he feels are dependent on human action. God cannot experience joy from a returning sinner if said sinner does not repent. The God Jesus taught about is more like humanity than traditional interpreters have often thought. Not only what Jesus taught about God, but the way he manifested God in his treatment of people—he undeserving and unwanted—provides powerful indications that God is deeply sensitive and responsive to human experience.³⁴

2.3 Conclusion

Overall, Scripture does not seem to fully support the traditional Christian view of God which has assumed his sovereign omnipotence and omniscience over creation. In this view, God possesses divine foreknowledge, knowing all that has happened, is happening, and will happen in the future. Passages from Scripture such as Isaiah 46:21-24, Psalm 139, and Mathew 26:33-35,

³³ Stein, Robert H. *Luke*. Nashville, TN: Broadman, 1992. Print. 406.

³⁴ Pinnock. *The Openness of God*. 43. Pinnock also states, “In particular, the anthropomorphisms in the Bible represent the proclamation about God in terms of the person and work of Christ.” Thus, in further response to my original argument in the first section of my New Testament analysis of the incarnation, Jesus is revealing God’s divine characteristics teaching and likening to humanities emotions by showing their similarities and differences.

seem to provide an adequate explanation for these divine attributes. However, this understanding of omnipotence and omniscience lead to unilateral control, resulting in debilitating effects on God's divine characteristics. Furthermore, opponents of the traditional understanding are quick to claim these interpreters are drawing too many conclusions from the text.

In addition to these passages, open theists provide an interpretation of Scripture which contributes to the uncertainty of Scripture. By providing a lens to interpret God's divine characteristics through, open theist show how Scripture reveals a God is who influenced by humanities decision. In the book of Jonah and Exodus 32, open theists show how prayer affects what decisions God will make. The doctrine of the Incarnation reveals to us the vulnerability of God and his desire to relate to us in a particular way by becoming human. Then by examining how Jesus lives and what he teaches, like in Luke 15, readers see a God who rejoices over sinners who repent. With both, the traditional interpretation and the open interpretation in mind, I have concluded Scripture to be uncertain about definitively defining the nature of God. As a result, a view of God as it pertains to reason must be established.

3. Reason and Logic

Christians claim to believe in an omnibenevolent God who cares for his creation in an intentional and specific way. How does a God who is omnibenevolent, and knows the future of human action, create the reality in which humans currently live in? Going against the traditional understanding of God's omniscience, this section will argue the logic of open theism. Since Christian's believe God has given humanity freewill, God can therefore possess only present knowledge, and has voluntarily given up total control over much of what occurs in the human realm. Therefore, open theism as a dominant Christian paradigm ought to be argued in the

following ways: open theism supplies the most reasonable explanation for God's divine characteristics of omnipotence and omniscience, provides the best opportunity for God and humans to partake in authentic relationship, and offers an adequate explanation for the problem of evil.

Since Christians believe in a personal God, then the divine characteristics of omnipotence and omniscience contribute to understanding God and how he can relate to creation. God's omnipotence and omniscience are constituted by three variables which must be examined; divine power and how God exercises his power in the world, human freedom, and divine knowledge of the world.³⁵ Open theists believe God exercises divine power over creation but does not have unilateral control over everything that happens. The traditional view was most notably claimed by John Calvin, who in attacking natural theistic philosophy stated, "For God's love to be effective, he must have total control over humanity. The world is in his hands and he governs it as he wills."³⁶

3.1 Divine Power

The open view claims God cannot exercise unilateral control over all creation. God can do anything which is *logically* possible. Therefore, God cannot create a married bachelor, a four-sided triangle, or a rock so big that even he cannot lift. God can and does intervene with humanity at certain times in so far as he does not infringe upon human free will. It is important to remember that God does have freewill himself and can divinely intervene with any state of human affairs if he chooses. This mode of God's power redefines the way he interacts with the

³⁵ Peterson, Michael L. *Reason and Religious Belief: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*. 5th ed. New York: Oxford UP, 2013. Print. 162.

³⁶ Bouwsma, William J. *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait*. New York: Oxford UP, 1988. Print. 163.

world by emphasizing his relational character. Christian should not view God as an agent outside of creation setting into motion the actors within creation. God is an active actor playing a role and influenced by his own creation. God acts as only God can act, universally as object for all subjects and subject of all objects.³⁷ Not only does God have the power to set creation into motion but how creation interacts with him directly affects how he uses his power within creation. The relational aspect of omnipotence can only be known by how God interacts with humans. Given the amount of freewill God has granted humanity it is impossible for him to control all aspects of their reality. To understand what some may claim as a limiting attribute of the God in open theism, human freedom must be further examined.

3.2 Human Freedom

There are two major conceptions of human freedom, the compatibilist and libertarian understandings. Compatibilist freewill is a concept where God can exercise unilateral control over creation and humans can exercise total freewill. Presented by St. Augustine, divine foreknowledge and human free will can be held in congruence if God knows an individual will act a certain way at a certain time, where the immediate cause is internal to the individual, and the individual is able to forgo the act when the time for performing it arrives.³⁸ On the other hand, open theism affirms libertarian freewill. Libertarian freewill is the understanding where an individual is free with respect to performing an action, if this individual has the power to choose to perform A or not perform A. Both A and not A could actually occur; which will occur has not

³⁷ Towne, Edgar. "Inquiry into Theism: The Plausibility of Panentheism" (Presidential Address, American Theological Society, Midwest Division, 2004) 14.

³⁸ Donald M Borchert, . *Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Determinables - Fuzzy Logic*. 2nd ed. Vol. 3. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2006. Print. 8.

yet been determined.³⁹ Libertarian freewill is an essential belief for the Christian faith and depicts a more relational God than other theistic views while also giving human choice moral and significant power.

The powers of God commonly associated with the fundamental view of omnipotence established by theological determinists do not necessarily have to be removed. Rather, the mode by which God utilizes this power is redirected. Instead of God unilaterally controlling all events in the human realm, he chooses not to control human action so that meaningful relationships with humans where their decisions have significant impacts can be established. David Basinger provides the following explanation:

Since freewill theists believe that God has chosen to create a world in which humans have been granted the power to exercise pervasive, morally significant freedom of choice, and that God cannot unilaterally ensure that humans exercising choice will make the decisions he would have them to make, freewill theists conclude that God does not exercise unilateral control over many important aspects of what occurs in our earthly realm. This must be explicitly reemphasized as God choose a self-limitation.⁴⁰

As a result, Christians must understand God's omnipotence through the lens of him exercising his freewill. God could use his power unilaterally to bring about specific events. However, God freely chooses not to exercise this control over creation, thus establishing humanities freewill. God can divinely intervene in the earthly realm, bring about desired results, and exercise his persuasive powers, but will insofar as he does not infringe on human freedom.

3.3 Divine Knowledge

To understand why God operates with creation in this mode, Christians must reinterpret

³⁹ Basinger, David. "Middle Knowledge and Classical Christian Thought," *Religious Studies* 22 (1986), 416 [reprinted in Michaela Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, eds, *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th ed, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) (hereinafter PRSR 4e), Part 8].

⁴⁰ Basinger, David. *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996. Print. 36.

the doctrine of divine omniscience. God does not exercise unilateral control because there are human choices in which he does not know the outcome for certain. God's mode of divine omniscience should be understood through him possessing present knowledge. Those who believe that God possesses present knowledge maintain that his knowledge is limited to everything that is (or has been) actual and to what follows deterministically from it.⁴¹ In other words, God can only know what is logically possible. The logical impossibilities of God's omniscience can be compared to the same impossibilities attributed to his omnipotence. In the same way, God cannot create a married bachelor, or a rock that is too heavy to lift, so then God cannot know the future. To state the phrase, "God knows the future" is illogical.

Furthermore, God cannot know the future exhaustively with humans also having the ability to maintain their freewill. Let us examine the analogy of Clarence to further solidify God's mode omnipotence and omniscience in open theism and against the traditional view:

1. It is now true that Clarence will have a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow.
(Premise)
2. It is impossible that God should at any time believe what is false, or fail to believe anything that is true. (Premise: divine omniscience)
3. God has always believed that Clarence will have a cheese omelet tomorrow. (From 1,2)
4. If God has always believed a certain thing, it is not in anyone's power to bring it about that God has not always believed that thing. (Premise: the unalterability of the past)
5. Therefore, it is not in Clarence's power to bring it about that God has not always believed that he would have a cheese omelet for breakfast. (From 3,4)
6. It is not possible for it to be true both that God has always believed that Clarence would have a cheese omelet for breakfast, and that he does not in fact have one.
(From 2)
7. Therefore, it is not in Clarence's power to refrain from having a cheese omelet for breakfast tomorrow. (From 5,6)

⁴¹ Ibid. 39.

Therefore, Clarence eating the omelet tomorrow, is not an act of free choice.⁴²

If Christians believe in a God who has given humanity freewill, examining the above analogy of Clarence establishes open theism's understanding of God. In this analogy, we conclude Clarence's inability to have a free choice based directly on what God knows about future events. The traditional mode of God's omnipotence presents a unilaterally controlling God, who interacts with creation in a domineering fashion, bringing about his desired outcomes. A thoroughly reasoned mode of God's omniscience ascribes present knowledge, thus maintaining libertarian freewill for humanity. God does not controlling what humans freely choose to do but rather works together with humans, allowing their choices to impact his work in the world.

3.4 God, Humans, and Authentic Relationship

A more open and relational view of God establishes the best foundation for God and humans to partake in authentic relationship. Everything an omnibenevolent God does, is motivated by love, hence, according to the open view, God created the world as an expression of his love and for the purpose of inviting others to share in his love.⁴³ Therefore, the purpose of humanity is to engage in a loving relationship with God by authentic reciprocation. Love is not authentic if it is not freely chosen between both parties who are attempting to engage in relationship. Humans must be able to freely choose to receive and reciprocate love with God. In doing so, both God and humans provide the foundation for authentic relationship.

The open view argues that God does not meticulously control everything precisely

⁴² Hasker, William. *God, Time, and Knowledge*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989. Print. 69.

⁴³ Helseth, Paul Kjos and Dennis W. Jowers. *Four Views on Divine Providence*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. Print. 188.

because God is a God of perfect love.⁴⁴ This idea gives value to the very essence of relationship itself. In this unique relationship, God's interactions with humans are contingent on the undetermined decisions humans make. What happens to humans and what occurs in the earthly realm affects and makes a difference to God. Love also involves affirming and valuing the other. God relates to humans in ways that respect and preserve their integrity.⁴⁵

God does not determine what a human will choose nor does he cancel out the effects of their actions. The divine and human relationship is not a one way avenue determined by God. Rather, because of the impact of free actions, humans are constantly contributing to the relationship in an authentic manner. An authentic interpersonal relation of love necessarily involves not merely purely creative or one way love, but genuine mutuality and reciprocity of love, including not only giving of love but the joyful acceptance of it and response to it.⁴⁶ Based on the above, the relationship between God and humans must be mutually shared and authentic.

This view of the divine and human relationship gives human action value and purpose. Human action has value if they can be labeled good or bad and has purpose if there is an effect because of the action. Since humans have the power to influence God and how he responds to humans, this idea further shows how God values and respects the free acts of humans. God makes himself open to us, and the future is open because God does not decide everything apart from our input.⁴⁷ God does not determine human action and therefore, humans choosing to believe, engage in relationship, and communicate with God is an act of authentic love on both parties. Love is shown through the former party seeking and establishing the conditions of the

⁴⁴ Ibid. 204.

⁴⁵ Oord, Thomas Jay. *Creation Made Free: Open Theology Engaging Science*. Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2009. 240.

⁴⁶ Sanders, John. *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007. Print. 164.

⁴⁷ Sanders. *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*. 281.

relationship and the latter party freely choosing to engage in relationship with the pre-established conditions. Since open theism asserts libertarian freewill as an essential belief, and libertarian freewill is needed for authentic relationship to be shared between God and humans, this view provides the best opportunity for God and humans to partake in authentic relationship.

Petitionary prayer is another fundamental aspect of Christian life which provides opportunity for authentic relationship to be shared between God and humans. Petitionary prayer ought to be understood through the popular apex model of prayer. The apex consists of human beings and the condition prayed for at the bottom, with God at the top: that is, a prayer (P) affects God (G), who in turn decides whether to answer (A) the prayer.⁴⁸ Two premises must be examined within this model, the ladder being dependent on the former. The first premise is, when a prayer is enacted by P, then G is made aware of this prayer. Since G does not know if P will pray for certain, the simple act of prayer itself establishes the opportunity for a connection between P-G-A. Thus, God becomes cognitively aware P is attempting to engage in conversation with him. The second premise is understood relationally. Once the opportunity for connection between P and G has been established, G now has the opportunity to perform A and interact with P. As a result of P providing opportunity and inviting G to act with A, one might think the purpose of prayer is to invite God to act in our lives, or in the case of intercessory prayer, to act in other people's lives.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Hasker, William. Thomas Jay. Oord, and Dean W. Zimmerman. *God in an Open Universe: Science, Metaphysics, and Open Theism*. Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2011. Print. 168.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 169.

3.5 The Problem of Evil

The problem of evil has plagued humanity and theistic belief for centuries. Individuals who oppose theistic belief will claim that since God is perfectly good, omnibenevolent, omnipotent, and omniscient, he would not create a world where evil exists. To understand how God and evil are compatible, the definition of evil must be defined to prevent confusion. The common state of affairs that most identify as evil is that they are inherently undesirable, not only lack inherent value, but actually detract from or diminish the value in our world; they are states of affairs that themselves have negative value.⁵⁰ Within this definition there are different categories of evil—natural evil and moral evil. Natural evil is any state of affairs which causes unintentional pain or suffering of impersonal forces or human action. Moral evil consists of wrongful or hurtful acts, as well as bad character traits of human beings.⁵¹ This section will argue for the logical necessity of evil's existence in a world where God created humans to have libertarian free will and provide an adequate theodicy for the problem of evil within theistic belief.

Previously, we have discussed God's omnipotence, omniscience, human freewill, and the authentic relationship God and humans partake in within the open view of God. These arguments build the foundation for the logical necessity of evil's existence in the world. Every instance of evil, it is held, is a necessary antecedent condition for or the unavoidable by-product of, the actualization of God's creative goals and thus is not incompatible with his existence.⁵² Human decision making directly contributes to the existence of evil in the world. A necessary antecedent

⁵⁰ Basinger *The Case for Freewill Theism*. 85.

⁵¹ Peterson, *Reason and Religious Belief*. 179.

⁵² Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism*. 86.

and unavoidable by-product of God actualizing a world where humans have libertarian freewill is the possibility of humans rejecting God and making decisions which produce evil.

The necessary antecedent condition for evils existence starts with the nature of God's divine project of producing significant others who are able to enter into reciprocal fellowship with him. The following argument, presented by Alvin Plantinga, proves the existence of evil is compatible with an omnipotent, omniscience, omnibenevolent God:

A world containing creatures who are sometimes significantly free (and freely perform more good than evil actions) is more valuable, all else being equal, than a world containing no free creatures at all. Now God can create free creatures, but he cannot cause or determine them to do only what is right. For if he does so, then they are not significantly free after all; they do not do what is right freely. To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, he must create creatures capable of moral evil, and he cannot leave these creatures free to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so. God did in fact create significantly free creatures; but some of them went wrong in the exercise of their freedom: this is the source of moral evil. The fact that these free creatures sometimes go wrong, however, counts neither against God's omnipotence nor against his goodness; for he could have forestalled the occurrence of moral evil only by excising the possibility of moral good.⁵³

In this argument, Plantinga uses logic to confirm the existence of evil as a necessary antecedent condition and unavoidable byproduct of God actualizing a world where humans exercise libertarian freewill. The premise, "To create creatures capable of moral good, therefore, he must create creatures capable of moral evil, and he cannot leave these creatures free to perform evil and at the same time prevent them from doing so" is affirmed by the law of non-contradiction. Two propositions contradict each other only when the truth of either one necessarily means the falsity of the other, and the falsity of either one necessarily means the truth of the other, therefore, both P and –P cannot be both true.⁵⁴ To act outside of the law of non-contradiction is to act within the contradictory premise fallacy. Therefore, God must act within the law of non-

⁵³ Plantinga, Alvin. *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), 166-167.

⁵⁴ Kreeft, Peter and Trent Dougherty. *Socratic Logic: A Logic Text Using Socratic Method, Platonic Questions & Aristotelian Principles*. South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's, 2010. Print. 174.

contradiction; the above stated premise presented by Plantinga, and without doing so would weaken the fundamental attributes of God's nature.

Once the logical necessity for the existence of evil has been proven and established, an explanation of the problem of evil in relationship to God must be constructed in the form of a theodicy. The foundation of a theodicy in open theism is rooted in self-determining freedom and moral responsibility. As Robert Kane and others have argued, the intelligibility of our convictions about moral responsibility depends on the supposition that the agent is the final cause and explanation for his or her own behavior.⁵⁵ This idea removes the final cause of evil from God and places it upon humans. God has actualized a world in which love must be chosen by the freewill of his creation. Within the choice to choose to love, God also provides the opportunity to choose to reject God. Believing human choice affects and influences reality, a free action chosen by humans must have implications and cannot simply be capricious. Kane highlights this insight as the key to understanding self-determining freedom when he notes:

What is required (for the intelligibility) of free choice... is not that they be completely explicable in terms of the past, but that they possess a "teleological intelligibility" or "narrative continuity" which is to say the choices can be fit into meaningful sequences.⁵⁶

Humans choosing to enter into relationship with God, or reject this opportunity, both have teleological implications. If choosing to reject a relationship with God has no implications then choosing to enter a relationship with God also has no implications. Therefore, evil is created when humans choose to reject entering into a relationship with God.

⁵⁵ Robert Kane. *The significance of Freedom*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 79-101.

⁵⁶ Kane. *The Significance of Freedom*. 146.

3.6 Conclusion

In this section of my paper, I have presented a logical approach to understanding God. The open view presents the best possible explanation for God's divine characteristics of omnipotence and omniscience, provides the best opportunity for God and humans to partake in authentic relationship, and supplies an adequate explanation for the problem of evil. The future is open, and inherently unknowable by God. God has actualized a world where humans have significant impact on God and the world because of libertarian freewill. Within the concept of freewill, the opportunity for authentic relationship develops. Petitionary prayer is an essential belief to open theism when establishing the relationship between God and humans. How and what humans pray impact God and how he will interact with the world. Given the ideas of God's omnipotence, omniscience, and the relationship shared between God and humans, open theism establishes the compatibility of the existence of God and the observable evil humans experience in this world.

4. Evangelical Theology

Open theism presents a theology of God which is very different from the traditional view held by many evangelical Christians. To the fundamental evangelical, the doctrinal proposals appear to reveal serious deficiencies to areas of practical Christian experience. Some fundamental evangelicals claim the open view of God has crippling effects on God's nature and worthiness of worship. In the preface of his book, Bruce Ware states the following in relation to the open theology vs. classical theology debate, "It has everything to do with whether God is worthy of our uncontested reliance, our unqualified devotion, and our unreserved worship. It

affects the whole picture of who God is and what life in his presence is all about.”⁵⁷ Before examining the open view of God in relation the evangelical community, a summary will be provided of above sections to situate opposition by classical evangelicalism.

Firstly, the open view has a different hermeneutical approach to Scripture. Open hermeneutics reveal a God who is directly affected by human action. The story of Jonah shows how God repents and is moved into a new action based upon the repentance of the Ninevites. The story of Moses interacting with God in Exodus also shows how God changes his mind based on the petition of Moses on behalf of Israel. In the New Testament, Christians believe God is fully revealed in and through Jesus Christ. Subsequently, how Jesus lives and what he teaches are insights into God’s divine inner character. These interpretations lead to a God who is drastically moved by humans, and in some cases, the mercy and goodness God would bestow is dependent on humanities actions.

Secondly, open theology reinterprets how God interacts with the world. God does not know the future of human action for certain; thus, he possesses only present knowledge of the world. Since God has granted humanity significant amounts of freedom, he is unable to act arbitrarily with creation. When God interacts with the world, he does not use coercive power to bring about his desired results. These attributes ascribed to God and humanity place the responsibility of evil upon humanities own freewill decision making. Thus, the opportunity for authentic relationship to be shared with God and humans necessarily entails the rejection of this relationship.

An open and relational view of God reject the traditional understanding of immutability, impassibility, and meticulous providence or foreordination of all things. The open view rejects

⁵⁷ Ware. *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*. 9-10.

the cause of human action as being determined because God foreordains the future. Evangelical critics are cautions to adopt the open view of God and leave their fundamental theological views. With a holistic approach to the open view in mind, the evangelical response against this understanding must be presented.

4.1 Problems with Open Theism: Omniscience and Prayer

The first problem evangelical theology presents against open theology revolves around God's omniscience as it pertains to prayer. Concerning God's intimate knowledge of humans, open theology asserts that God has intimate knowledge of our inner thoughts. God knows the thoughts and intentions of all individuals perfectly and can play them out in his mind like an infinitely wise chess player, anticipating every possible combination of moves his opponents could ever make.⁵⁸ Because God also knows everything past and present⁵⁹, he already knows anything and everything his children would tell him in prayer.⁶⁰ Therefore, evangelical theology asserts the difficulty of understanding how human prayers can influence God. Some might say, that overtime God may begin to gain a better understanding of humanity as the prayers of humans, in their seriousness, reveal the depths of longing over time. The following quote reflects how evangelical theology addresses the open view of prayer:

Although, since God fully knows their thoughts and attitudes of heart all the time prior to the times they come to him in prayer and, since God fully anticipates every possible state of heart or mind we might have, it seems that the openness proponent cannot right believe that he or she actually tells God anything in prayer that he does not already know and has not already fully anticipated. So the problem stands: God can gain no knowledge through prayer.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Boyd. *God of the Possible*. 35.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 152.

⁶⁰ Basinger. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. 165.

⁶¹ Ware. *God's Lesser Glory*. 164-165.

Therefore, according to Ware, the function of prayer in the open view does not bring to God any new knowledge. Essentially, prayer can never be a basis for God to gain new knowledge, learn something new from humans, and change his mind. The open view of prayer brings God down to a level of relationality comparable to humans. However, since God knows all things past and present, and anticipates all by this present knowledge, the relationship God shares with humanity is unlike the relationship humans share with one another.

Biblical scholars such as Greg Boyd and John Sanders, provide examples from an open view that show how prayer does indeed bring about change in God's mind. Abraham, (Gen. 18:22-23), Jacob (Gen. 32), Moses (Exod. 32:14, 33:1-2, 14; Deut. 9:13-29), Hezekiah (2 Kgs. 20:1-6), and Amos (Amos 7:1-6) are all regarded as having altered God's intentions through their petitions.⁶² With biblical support, these ideas seem to move believers and motivate them to engage in petitionary prayer. Especially in the case of praying for the conversion of an individual person, the open model of prayer is no help. Open theists ought to not pray for the conversion of individuals, and at most what they could pray for would be neutral, nonthreatening things that do not infringe upon the "rights" of other individuals.⁶³ Since God is not in control, prayer is thus deemed ineffective and unreasonable.

Adversaries of open theology can have more faith in God through their understanding of prayer. Prayer is not so much for God's sake but for ours, and the effect it has on the believer should not be underestimated. To pray is to exercise faith, to remind oneself of one's dependence on God, to grow in the virtue of humility, and to be directly comforted by God's Spirit.⁶⁴ This model of prayer is effective because there is assurance and confidence in God's sovereignty over

⁶² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 82-85; Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 53-53; 63-66.

⁶³ Wright, R. K. McGregor. *No place for sovereignty: what's wrong with freewill theism*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996. 193.

⁶⁴ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.20.3 (1:851-53).

creation. In all aspects of life, believers should use prayer to bring themselves in line with God's decreed will. Also, prayers are secondary causes effective in accomplishing God's divine will, human petitions really do impact the world.⁶⁵ Therefore, prayer is not only an integral part of God's divine plan but is also effective in bringing about God's desired results. Confidence in God's divine sovereignty and plan provides a stronger foundation for passionate prayer than what is offered by open theology.

4.2 Divine Wisdom

The second problem presented by evangelicals regards God's omniscience as it pertains to divine wisdom. Open advocates make it sound as if our prayers are so commendable that God will listen to them and make decisions based on what he hears in human prayers. The issue is, that God, being God, and being divinely omniscient, always knows what is best in any given situation. It seems unlikely that God would listen to the direction of human prayers which are influenced by impure motives, distorted perspectives, and sinful urges. Consider that, since God is supremely wise, he will know one of two things when we bring him our petitions: (1) he will know that what we are asking is inferior to his plan; or (2) he will know what we are asking matches his plan.⁶⁶ By examining both premises above, and in relation to the open view, God will either be doing what he already knows is best or listen to the prayers of humans and doing what is not best.

⁶⁵ Huffman, Douglas S., and Eric L. Johnson. *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002. 205. Drawing from Thomas Aquinas, James S. Spiegel is explaining, "Divine providence disposes not only what effects shall take place, but also from what causes and in what order these effects shall proceed. Now among other causes human acts are the causes of certain effects. We pray, not that we may change the divine position, but that we may impetrate that which God has disposed to be fulfilled by our prayers." (*Summa Theologiae*, 2-2. Q83.A2, 2:1539).

⁶⁶ Ware. *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism*. 168-169.

Another problem attached to God's wisdom in the open view is that God has the potential to get things wrong. Basinger asserts for the open view, "Since we believe that God can know only what can be known and that what humans will freely do in the future cannot be known before hand, we believe that God can never know with certainty what will happen in any context involving freedom of choice."⁶⁷ As a result, humans then have a reason to doubt whether divine wisdom and God's will is the best path to follow. Basinger further asserts, "that which God believes in his unparalleled wisdom believes to be the best course of action at any given time may not produce the anticipated results in the long run."⁶⁸ Evangelicals claim this future uncertainty directly removes human confidence in God. Ware claims, "prayers founded on the presupposition, "Your will be done," begin to falter and God is not perfectly wise but only sufficiently wise; thus, God is too wise to need or benefit from our help, but not wise enough to remove doubt and lack of confidence in him."⁶⁹

In reference to God's will, humans are unable to rely on God in confidence for long term decision making. Since God's knowledge is evolving based on human participation, then God's guidance is relative in its level of accuracy. The distant future has too many unpredictable variables unforeseen by God which makes him unable to give guidance for. If God's knowledge is contingent upon the outset of human action, then an individual may question whether God's direction is in fact best. Every bit of counsel he gives, to every person, in every situation, of necessity lacks vital information that he has no access to because that information is located in an unknown future.⁷⁰ This view of God presents practical implications because most of the decisions individuals make have long term consequences. Thus, open theist's have redefined the

⁶⁷ Basinger. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. 163.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 165

⁶⁹ Ware. *God's Lesser Glory*. 171.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 180.

divine and human relationship to function in the following way:

It is God's desire that we enter into a give-and-take relationship of love, and this is not accomplished by God's forcing is blueprint on us. Rather, God wants us to go through life together with him, making decisions together. Together we decide the actual course of my life. God's will for my life does not reside in a list of specific activities but in a personal relationship. As lover and friend, God works with us wherever we go and whatever we do. To a large extent our future is open and we are to determine what it will be in dialogue with God.⁷¹

According to Sanders, God does not have a best plan of action in place for individuals, but rather, works together with individuals to develop a plan as their lives unfold. Opponents of this view suggest that humans have been elevated to the level of God, or rather, God's divine essence has diminished God to the level of humanity. In doing so, God is robbed of his divine qualities of infinite knowledge and divine omnipotence. This view of God is supposed to engender comfort and hope on the part of believers, but in fact it destroys the very foundation which the bible establishes trust in God.⁷² Therefore, individuals cannot expect God to know what the best path of life or decision is for certain; and further, individuals can potentially question what decisions and actions they discern God may be moving them towards.

4.3 Divine Love and Impassability

The third problem with the open view of divine omniscience pertains to God's love and immutability. Since open theists claim human prayers may be the basis for whether God acts and in what God decides to do, it can be concluded that God may be withholding some amount of

⁷¹ Sanders, *God Who Risks*. 277.

⁷² Wilson, Douglas. *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism*. Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001 177-178 and Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*, 186-187, both authors attempt to show how an individual's theological foundation would be dismantled in the open view by using scripture. For the purpose of this section, I have omitted the scripture references but they are as follows: Rev. 15:3, Ps. 22:28, 89:9, 93:1, 96:10, 9:1, 99:1. 146:10, Exod. 15:18 Dan. 4:35 which refer to a God who, "rules over the nations and sea, who's rule is forever and ever." (Wilson 177-178) and Isa. 40: 13-17, 42:8 (Ware 186-187), which points out God's claim to infinite glory based on divine attributes.

goodness which he wanted to bestow, but is unable to do so without the petition of prayer. Any specific intervention by God to interfere directly with a person's chosen course would be a violation of both the individual's personhood and of the "rules of the game God sovereignly established" in creating people with libertarian freedom.⁷³ This view of how God interacts with humans raises questions of whether or not it can be loving for God to withhold the good for a human due to human negligence in prayer. Likewise, Ware asserts the following:

The problem seems especially severe, however, in relation to petitionary prayer on behalf of others. How long may God withhold the good he knows one person needs just because another person is negligent or disobedient in praying? One would think that, if God truly loves all equally and impartially, he would not diminish the good he knows is best for someone because of another's negligence or disobedience in prayer.⁷⁴

Thus, God's divine attribute of omni-benevolence is at stake in the open view. God either bestows goodness upon a human because he can and knows it is best or withholds it because of another individual's negligence in prayer. How God interacts through prayer, and what he chooses to do has direct consequences on what open theists claim as libertarian freewill and God's divine characteristic of omni-benevolence.

If individuals believe petitionary prayer moves God to act and respond within another individual's life, open theists run into problems regarding freewill. If libertarian freewill is the kind of freedom we have, then it simply is not the case that God can work in such a way that he can guarantee his own desired results. Therefore, God cannot also work decisively in another's heart and so cannot guarantee that the person will choose what both we and God would want.

Also, then, if God cannot guarantee that a person will choose what he desires, then open theists

⁷³ Wilson. *Bound Only Once*. Wilson attempts to dismantle the logic of Basinger's open view of God. As Wilson states, "According to Basinger, God can unilaterally intervene in earthly affairs", but also adds, "a key assumption in the Open model is that God so values the inherent integrity of significant human freedom – the ability of individuals to maintain control over significant aspects of their lives – that he will not as a general rule force his created moral agents to perform actions that they do not freely desire to perform or manipulate the natural environment in such a way that their freedom of choice is destroyed (The Openness of God, 160-161). This idea is what Wilson is referring to when he states, "rules of the game God sovereignly established."

⁷⁴ Ibid. 173.

are continually asking God to do that which he can't.⁷⁵ God's lack of goodness has implications in petitionary prayer and acts of evil as described earlier in this section as "rules of the game". God either allows suffering he could prevent, which raises moral questions about God's character and his worthiness of worship; or, God stands by unable to prevent human suffering, in which case God has essentially no control over evil. While the open theists may gain a friend in God, they lose God as Lord of their life.

Classical theism typically argues that God is immutable and is not dependent on human action for any fulfillment of his plan. To hold otherwise, as Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, and others have made abundantly clear, is to deny that God is God; it is to fall away from theism itself.⁷⁶ Classical theism has asserted that the nature of God is immutable and impassable. Since open theists diminish the character of God to the level of humanity, they thus view the nature of Christ in isolation. In relationship to the love shown on the cross and the suffering of Christ, it was Christ's human nature which suffered, not his divine nature. St. Gregory explains it in the following way:

For the impassible one became the suffering of the passions, inflicting suffering on them by the fact that impassibility manifested itself as his impassibility in his Passion. For what the passions do to those who are passable, that same thing he, the impassible one, did to the passions by his Passion...For if a piece of adamant stuck with iron does not suffer by the impact, but on the contrary remains impassible as it was, to such an extent that the force of the impact returns upon the smiter, since adamant shows itself impassible by nature and does not yield to the impact of the passions, why should we not say that the impassible one became a cause of suffering for the passions?⁷⁷

Whereas Scripture states it is the body of Christ which has suffered and since open theists ascribe passion to God, they inevitably remove Christ's suffering on our behalf. God, being perfect in his nature, cannot experience suffering. If God is perfect and complete in his essence, then he can

⁷⁵ Ibid. 174.

⁷⁶ Huffman, *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*. 213.

⁷⁷ Nyssenus, Gregorius, Michael Slusser, and Gregorius Thaumaturgus. *St. Gregory Thaumaturgus: life and works*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1998. 157-158.

never become imperfect or incomplete.⁷⁸ Thus, when open theists reformulate essential doctrines of Christianity, they diminish the character and nature of God.

4.4 Conclusion

This section has examined the evangelical response to the open view of God. First, evangelicals believe the foundation of Christian prayer is removed in the open view. Essentially, prayer does not bring God any new knowledge, and petitionary prayer cannot override the freewill of other humans. Secondly, divine guidance is at stake in the open view. Since God does not know the future of human actions, there is a potential for God to get things wrong. As a result, humans can doubt whether God's guidance is the best path to follow. Humans cannot even expect God to know the best path for their future. Thirdly, God's love is to be questioned in the open view. God is incapable of bestowing love on an individual because of their freewill or another individual's freewill. This dilemma raises the question of whether or not is loving for God to withhold the good for a human on the basis of another individual's lack of petition. God glory in the open view is deemed diminished and inadequate for human worship.

5. Open Theism as a Christian Paradigm

The concept of God is the most important topic in theology. Trying to understand the nature of God and his different modes of divine attributes, we become aware of our limitations and finite understanding of the metaphysical world. In some conceptual models of, God is totally unaffected by what happens in the earthly realm. God is characterized as infallibly knowing all that will happen in the future, and will exercise his divine power to ensure these results come

⁷⁸ Huffman, *God Under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God*. 239.

about. What has been discussed thus far, the open view of God, challenges the traditional understanding of God's nature and how he interacts in the world. These adjustments to traditional Christian doctrine have implications for everyday Christian praxis. Given the support previously provided for the open view, an analysis their implications must further be examined.

5.1 God's Will

Many Christians who claim to live and interact with God operate under the traditional understanding of his divine attributes. An important topic of discussion in all Christian traditions is the emphasis on God's will. Life is full of decisions at every turn. Some decisions are trivial and will seem to only be a matter of preference. Other decisions may test moral character and challenge an individual's virtuous development. Still, some decisions are monumental and will change the trajectory of an individual's life forever. Here is a story of Luke and how he is attempting to discern and live into God's will for his life.

Luke is a college senior studying biblical studies and global missions. As graduation approaches, he is presented with many different opportunities for the next step in life. The opportunities are going to seminary to further his studies, accepting a youth pastor position in a local church, or traveling overseas for the summer and working with a Christian ministry organization. Luke is passionate about each one of these opportunities and all three will utilize his desire to serve God's kingdom. After weeks of fervent prayer, and attempting to discern God's will, Luke must make a final decision. However, he is unsure exactly what God would desire him to do and feels pressured to make the right decision. How is Luke to decide between the three opportunities?

Luke's scenario seems to be a common experience many practicing Christians encounter. When presented with multiple opportunities, they believe God has created a world where there are specific choices they should make. Seeking specific decisions enables individuals to develop a sense of pressure when unsure what direction they should take to ensure they are staying within the will of God. Individuals might even begin to question their faith and relationship with God. Given what has already been established about the nature of God and how he exercises his divine attributes in the world, Christians must reexamine how they interact with God and seek his will for their life. The plan God has for an individual's life does not consist of specific and detailed script. In Luke's case, God is not as concerned with what decision Luke will make, but more concerned with how Luke interacts with him while making this decision. God's ultimate desire for humanity is not dictate their every move but to engage in a loving and reciprocal relationship with them. The decisions humans make in their relationship with God provide an opportunity for authentic relationship to be built. Boyd seems to suggest that the decisions humans make in the world provide the opportunity for constructive relationship to be developed when he states:

Love requires relationship. If God's goal is love, creation must be conducive to building relationships. People need a common medium in which to relate to one another. This medium is our physical environment – our world. Relationships are only possible when (1) all parties can influence other by influencing their environment, and (2) no party can exhaustively control others.⁷⁹

Since God does not know the future of human action for certain, he uses the unpredictability of scenarios humans are presented with to deepen his relationship with them. When presented with multiple decisions, Luke must put his faith to the test. Essentially, the final choice is up to Luke with the assurance that God will be loving and refining him with either decision he chooses to make. God loves his creatures and desires to bless them, and the relationship God offers is one of

⁷⁹ Boyd. *Is God to Blame?*. 113-114.

love and vulnerability.⁸⁰ Luke and his relationship with God is not defined by if Luke makes the right decision or not, but more so if Luke is constantly seeking the presence of God, his guidance, and committing to God's purpose in either of the scenarios.

Christians can use the open view of God's divine will motivated out of love to deepen and enrich an authentic and reciprocal relationship with God. The open view of Scripture provides us with an understanding of a God who remains flexible as to the details of his plan. God does have an ultimate plan of redemption, salvation, and purpose for humanity. In return, God expects people to trust him and manifest that trust by collaborating with him toward the fulfillment of his divine plan.⁸¹ In combination with human decision making, God resourcefully uses different paths to usher humanity towards successful completion of his divine plan. Since God has empowered humans with significant amounts of freedom to make decisions in the world, humans have social and evangelistic responsibilities in the world.

5.2 Social and Evangelistic Responsibility

Social and evangelistic responsibility is closely related to the problem of evil. All Christians are rightly concerned about the devastating problems facing many in our world today: starvation, disease, racism, and sexism, to name a few.⁸² Traditional understandings of God are not capable of justifiably maintaining that there is a casual relationship between human decision making as the primary reason for the social problems our world faces. Though humans may be used by God to bring about solutions to these problems, the solution is dependent not on humans but on which side humans find themselves on within God's plan.

⁸⁰ Sanders. *The God Who Risks*. 71.

⁸¹ Sanders. *The God Who Risks*. 71.

⁸² Pinnock. *The Openness of God*. 172.

The open view evokes an obligation for Christians in the social sphere. Believing God has created a world where humans have significant amounts of freedom, the primary reason for the existence of social evil in the world is a result of human decision making. God's desire is for the social evils of the world to be redeemed and reconciled, but because God chooses not to use coercive power to bring about these desired results, he needs the cooperation of human agents. Thus, humans bear a tremendous amount of responsibility for what happens in social contexts where human decision making has significant impacts on human behaviors. It is important to note, unlike process theistic views, the open view of God is working towards a divine goal. Since humans have the capacity to make free decisions, and most of the social ills the world faces today is a result of them, then humans have the capacity and power to address and solve these social ills with their decisions and move towards God's ultimate plan for redemption. Therefore, it becomes important for the Christian to discover and address social problems in the world.

In connection with the social responsibilities for humans in the open view also arises an evangelistic responsibility. Almost all Christians believe that many people are not properly related to God personally and, accordingly, that it is also important to share with them the "good news" – the joy and excitement of being properly related to God.⁸³ Christians operating within the open view of God have a moral responsibility to help others engage in a right relationship with God. A right relationship with God can only come about as the result of humans freely choosing to enter this relationship. Since humans are ultimately created by God to be in a personal relationship with him, humans must enter relationship with God to give life its fullest meaning. Thus, as a result of Christians not sharing the "good news" we are failing our moral obligation to help others engage in a meaningful and personal relationship with God.

⁸³ Ibid. 173.

Evangelistic responsibility is important for all Christians in every area of their lives. It is important to note, that not every Christian is called to go overseas and perform some type of Christian missionary work. The work of Christian evangelizing can come in many forms, but besides active evangelizing, acknowledgement, education, and support of evangelizing is as equally vital and useful. The main point of understanding the obligation of evangelization are the consequences of a lack thereof. God has given Christians the command to preach and evangelize lost people. Like in the Old Testament comparison between Exodus and Ezekiel, where praying for a change caused God to repent and a lack thereof caused God to enact judgement, there is a human obligation for helping others to restore their relationship with God and consequences if failed to do so. While in other views, the salvation of humans is solely dependent on what God decides to do, the open view requires a corroboration with God by humans. Given this view of God, the fear that some will fail to enter fully into relationship with God because of human negligence, can justifiably serve as an important basis for evangelistic efforts.⁸⁴ Knowing that others are missing out on experiencing a right relationship with God should be a highly motivating factor for evangelizing. By evangelizing, Christians are providing an opportunity for unbelievers to enter an intimate and meaningful relationship with God. Christians are called to cultivate and develop communities of faith by which individuals can enter and become shaped into an individual who will also address the Christian responsibility for the social ills our world faces as well as the Christian responsibility for evangelization.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 175.

5.3 Conclusion

This examination has provided an open view understanding of God and the Christian obligation as a result. The traditional understanding of God has used Scripture to assert his divine foreknowledge and sovereign power in the world. Through reexamining Scripture, it can be concluded that all of scripture does not point towards the traditional understanding. There are times in Scripture where God interacts with humans on a deeply personal level where human actions affect how God interacts with the world. This dynamic mode of God's characteristics provides the opportunity for humans to reconstruct a theology of the divine and human relationship. Since Scripture is not the only method of understanding God's nature, reason and logic further provide an in in depth explanation.

Christians believe in a world where God has given humans significant amounts of freedom. God's desire for humanity is to engage in meaningful and personal relationships. God's desire to be in relationship with humanity is the basis for addressing the modes of God's divine attributes omniscience and omnipotence. God possess only present knowledge; therefore, requires humans to work with him to bring about his divine goals. As a result, the existence of evil is not attributed to God, but rather freewill human decision making.

Even with the case made in favor of the open view, no model of God is free from opposition. Evangelical theology has addressed the major areas of concern against this view. Evangelicals claim the open view diminishes the power, wisdom, and guidance of God. The open view of God then seems to be unworthy of worship. Since God does not know the future exhaustively, humans are incapable of trusting him for long term decision making. In this view,

not only is the glory of God diminished, but he is restricted because of human power. God desires to bless humans and wants to bestow upon them goodness, but is unable to do so because of humanities freewill. What God would want to do, he otherwise cannot because of a lack of human intercession.

Open theism as a Christian paradigm reinterprets how God interacts with the world. Since God does not exercise coercive power, and does not have a detailed script for humans to follow, God's will must not be viewed as a divine blueprint. Rather, God's will must be viewed through the lens of him desiring a deep and personal relationship with humans. He walks alongside humans, allowing their decisions to impact their life and how God interacts with them, while working towards the goal of bringing about his Kingdom. Human freedom evokes the sense of social and evangelistic responsibility. Since evil is the result of human freedom, bringing about God's kingdom can also be impacted by human decision making. Humans can play an active role in bringing about the goodness of God's kingdom. Also, human freedom provides the opportunity for an obligation towards evangelism. Since God desires a relationship with humans, humans are responsible for helping others enter this relationship. Overall, the open view provides a model of God which is rooted in love and personal relationship and gives humans moral responsibility for living the Christian life.

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