

THE OMNISCIENCE OF GOD

Introduction

It is very difficult to articulate one's views regarding the omniscience of God. There is profound agreement in the church world that God is all-knowing. The difficulty comes when different ones are asked to describe just what it is this means. I wish to state here in the beginning how much I adhere to the mystery of God. Certain things must be left to the mystery of God. A theme verse that provides a backdrop for all my searching, studying, coping, and wrestling is Isaiah 55: 8, 9. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts." There is a sense in which humans have a language barrier. We do not speak God. I am challenged by our reading assignments, and frankly, am not fully decided on my views even now, though I lean towards the Open view of God currently.

Having heeded the warning that knowledge puffs up, theologians teeter close to the precipice, because God has left us with the desire to know. Knowledge must be kept in perspective. Mind is only part of who we are. Yet the healthy longing for truth is an innate desire. One can no more resist it than the pains of hunger. So we search, study, cope, and wrestle. In the end it may be for naught. The conversation continues. Which contributions bring resolve? Only time will tell. It is unsettling that one can donate a lifetime of research and still not be sure. When I first began to study I wanted to bring resolve. The desire is still there. Yet the more I study the more difficulties I uncover. In eternity we will know even as we are fully known (I Cor 13:12).

The lengthy introduction is merited to segue properly into a difficult discussion on the omniscience of God. Tacitly related is the topic of the foreknowledge of God. I review four views on the topic: Calvinism; Simple-Foreknowledge; Middle-knowledge (or what has come to be known

as Molinism); and Openness. The four seem to categorize neatly in groups of two. The first two tend to emphasize God's attributes; the second two seem to emphasize God's gift to man. Since I tend toward the Open view I spend the most amount of discussion in the second broad category. This includes a proportionately large section detailing my own personal view (which is in a state of flux and evolution). I only brush the first category. Conclusions are drawn at the end of the paper.

The Various Views of Omniscience

Just what does omniscience mean? The question centers on degrees of freedom. How much freedom is too much freedom? I suggest any freedom, even an inkling of freedom, demands absolute freedom, or it ceases to be freedom. I feel it necessary to state how unequivocally I adhere to God's omniscience. Scripture describes God as perfect, knowing the number of hairs on our heads (Mat 10:30). God knows each of the stars by name (Psalm 147:4). I don't read this as passive poetry. I believe God actually does know this information. This is a number conservatively in the trillions in our little swath of the universe. God knows perfectly. It is difficult to envision this God not knowing any one thing. If Open view theologians describe the future as undecided they do not imply lack on God's part. The one thing God knows most perfectly is, to have relationship involves granting man a free will. Otherwise, no matter how one describes it, the God-human existence mirrors robotics in a calculated, static predictability. If there are things God doesn't know, it is because he has chosen not to for his desires on humanity. He values relationship that highly.

The Augustinian-Calvinist View

The classic Reformed position believes that God not only knows the future but decides it. It is built on the premise that God predestines some to salvation. Implicit in this view is the fact that some are, necessarily, predetermined to eternal damnation. Humans must embrace faith in Christ for salvation. However, ultimately, God may decide to condemn some who have even chosen to

serve him. Man may not receive assurance of salvation. Only God knows. I reject this notion based upon Scripture passages that teach otherwise. “God does not want any to perish” (2 Pet 3:8, 9). “I want all men everywhere to lift up holy hands in prayer” (1 Tim 2:8). “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Rom 10:13).

The Simple-Foreknowledge View

Alternatively, the Simple-Foreknowledge view believes that God simply knows the future. He does not cause it; but nor is he bothered by it. It’s the price of divinity. He knows all that will happen. So, every choice made by humanity, from the mundane to magnificent, he knows entirely. Since He is God it is not burdensome for him to have this knowledge. I have a lot of affinity for this view, but I feel it leaves no room for the gift of God, man’s freedom to choose. I do not think it accounts well for the dozens of Scriptures that mention God changing his mind, grieving, and having regrets. I do not believe anthropomorphism has accounted well for the plethora of references that seem to image God as one with feelings; emotions; compassion; anger; longings; laughter; joy and judgment calls.

The Middle-knowledge View (Molinism)

The Middle-knowledge view takes the idea *counterfactuals* and expands their implications to provide a scenario in which the future is determined by a method that employs both God’s magnificence and man’s decision-making. Purportedly, Luis de Malina was the promoter of this thought in the sixteenth century; though many are believed to have embraced the idea in church history. Middle-knowledge takes its name from the mysterious in-between that happens as natural knowledge (God knows every scenario that could possibly play out from any world he could potentially create) and free knowledge (God knows all contingencies) collide. Important to understanding the view is the idea of logical sequence. All agree that God created instantaneously

and simultaneously. It was decreed and it was so. At issue is what logical processes were carried out. Namely, did God decide Jesus would die on the cross because he wanted relationship so much? Or, did God decide to have Jesus die (in a manner of logic, after the fact) because sin had tainted hopes of relationship? This next statement may be overly sarcastic. God knows all the possibilities, and he creates scenarios that will allow man to choose, but in a way that confirms what he knew about man to begin with. God gives man the choice, and then says, "I told you so."

John Arminius may have been a proponent of this view. At least his thinking is very similar, God foreknows what a person will decide, and on the basis of what the person decides, God will base his election. Arminius, the Dutch theologian, is credited with developing the idea that is the polar opposite with Calvinism. It is important to note, Arminius's followers were the ones who pushed for the distinction. Their remonstrance in 1610, a year after the death of the leader stated the five points of objection with Calvinism. It was in response to this Remonstrance that teachers of Calvinism developed the acronym TULIP for which Calvinism is notorious. Arminius's views are at least similar to Molinism, the idea that God doesn't know what you will decide. God knows all the opportunities, possibilities and lets you choose. He bases his interaction with you based on what you decide. He will make the situation and you choose.

I resist this view more than the Simple-foreknowledge view. It seems to me to be contrived. It attempts to give an explanation for God's actions but muddies the waters. It would have been best to not delve into such notions because it seems to create an unfortunate looping effect. Though I wish to read the materials more, in order to be informed; I found myself unable to wrap my mind around the concepts. Apparently, all future possibilities that could ever occur, God knows as counterfactuals, before he decides what will be. This allows humans to freely choose. I cannot get away from the feeling of manipulation by God on this view.

The Open-Theism View

First it may be asked why Arminianism is given space apart from the Openness View. Many include it as a view of Arminianism. In as much as Greg Boyd, the primary originator of this view, seems to contrast the Open View of God against both Arminianism and Calvinism, in my opinion it should be located outside of both. For my purposes, I locate it on a scale somewhere between Antinomy and Arminianism in terms of the view of God's omniscience as it relates to freedom.

The Open View of God states that God knows all that he decides to know. Because he has decided to factor in freedom of choice for humanity, there are unknowns as to what individuals will decide. This does not negate the fact that God, the Master of all creation, is fully capable of fulfilling all prophecies through the overall picture of humanity as it unfolds. It differs from Molinism in that mankind is truly free to make decisions. The playing field has not been manipulated to assure certain results. It is just that God, all wise, will work within the flexibilities he has initiated and bring about his perfect plan.

There is an example in this assignment. The professor has graciously admonished the students to come to their own conclusions. He has said the grades will not be based upon one's view but the quality of defense. It is hoped he will give good grades so long as the students have pounded out their beliefs on the topic. They are each followers of Christ. They are in the class. They could've chosen another class, or school, or life work, but they have chosen this one. Yet they have been chosen as well. And the views will be as varied as the individuals. Probably there will be some who parrot the professor's view because they falsely anticipate that he desires this. Others may arrive at his same view because they have "pounded the pavement" of research and feel resolved on the matter. Still others will arrive at a differing view. These subordinate concerns illustrate the nature of free choice.

My Own Personal Views

I give the remainder of the paper to express my own personal views. They require a very careful reading of Romans 9 in relation to other Scriptures. And, granted, further exegesis is mandatory. But I think I raise some opinions that at least merit consideration.

Personal Testimony

I have lived the balance of my life without ever entertaining the idea that I could initiate or effect my own salvation. But I am not Calvinist/Reformed. Calvinists seem to feel this is an affront to God. I have prayed meaningfully for years, as well as read the Bible purposefully, without even the least prompting that I was in error. I believe it is fully compatible with Scripture to believe God initiates salvation and man chooses either to receive it or deny it.

Scriptural Difficulties

If Calvinism wishes to contend that Romans 9 implies God judged Esau before he was ever born it must show proof that the Scripture means Esau the individual and not Esau the nation, the latter is the language of Scripture. What I mean is this: if God truly hated Esau, he did a much better job of hating others in the Bible. Esau, when met by his estranged brother Jacob after a twenty-year hiatus, was offered a sizeable peace offering. Note carefully his words in response, “But Esau said, ‘I already have plenty, my brother. Keep what you have for yourself.’” (Gen 33:9) These certainly are not the words of one for whom the earth has opened up and swallowed alive into Sheol. These words are nowhere kin to the pain of one who endured a rain of burning sulfur upon his city. Were Sisera able to remove the tent peg from his temple, and the prophets of Baal their attacking swords from their throats, these might have a few words to speak in rebuttal to those who say Esau was hated by God.

A better way to explain the statement of Paul in Romans 9 is to understand it in light of the precise wording of Scripture. When Rebekah asked, “*Why is this happening to me?*” she was told, “Two

nations are in your womb.” Pre-birth God foresaw the people groups that Esau and Jacob would become. That Esau is the founder of the nation certainly bodes well with the view that he deserved judgment. Esau’s descendents became what he modeled – no doubt. Yet, properly, God’s judgment is upon a nation. This expands and widens the scope of the Romans 9 pronouncement considerably. It lends credence to the model proposed by Greg Boyd who sees similarities between the findings of quantum physics with the openness of God. He uses, for an illustration, an ant colony. Though it may be predicted with great accuracy how a colony of ants will behave, and even what they accomplish, it is impossible to predict the behavior of one single ant. Similarly God has predicted the behavior of the nation, Edom, and judged it, without judging the individual Esau. Though this is not the precise terminology of Scripture it is the intent. If Calvinists say otherwise, they must show delineation between the clear interchangeability of Esau and Edom in the Bible.

Obadiah, minor in its recording, is major in its impact. The minor prophet speaks postmortem, of both Esau and Jacob, conservatively by six-hundred years. Though Esau has long been dead, Obadiah says, “How Esau [not Edom] will be ransacked.” (Ob 1:6) But Esau is already dead. The reason cited is “because of the violence against your brother, Jacob... You should not look down on your brother.” (Ob 1:10, 12) How can Esau look down on Jacob from the grave? Esau and Jacob wrestled in Rebekah’s womb causing great turmoil. But then Jacob wrestled with God. His name-change signifies this. Yet many years after their respective deaths, Esau and Jacob continued to wrestle. Verse 18 looms ominous, “There will be no survivors from the house of Esau. The Lord has spoken.” History shows that after the nation of Edom was displaced from their high mountain-fortress, in which they placed such pride and security, they fled, ironically, to Jerusalem and blended in among the Jews as refugees. After the attack by Titus of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the Jews dispersed. Though Israel is returning to their homeland in droves during our lifetimes, (quite miraculous considering no other nation has been subjugated to nomad status for

near two thousand years and survived), we know nothing of Edom. The descendents of Esau seem to have disappeared from the planet. There are speculations by some of who they are today. But it certainly appears, as a concrete people, they disbanded and are no more. Thus, God's hatred of Esau, in advance, is no more than his judgment of any nation that rebels against him. Additionally, Jeremiah mirrors the exact same logic in his catalog of judgments against the nation, Jeremiah 49.

If some contend this is a misinterpretation of Obadiah, I would point out it is, then, equally wrong to find personal attribute, rather than personification, in Paul's use of Esau in Romans 9. It must be noted there is no hatred of Esau mentioned in his lifetime. In fact, he is "loved" by Isaac. (Gen 25:28) If Rebekah hated Esau the text does not mention it, only that she "loved" Jacob. The first mention of hatred of Esau is not until the close of the Old Testament. Malachi 1 speaks of God's judgment against Edom the nation.

² "I have loved you," says the LORD.

"But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'"

"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob,³ but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

Since Obadiah, Jeremiah, and Malachi all speak of Esau postmortem in a personalized manner, naming him, even though they clearly speak of a nation; and since Paul would have had access to this information; and seeing that Paul was an astute student; it is best to regard Paul's "Esau" as the judgment of the nation Edom. This best fits with intentionality of the texts in consideration.

Conclusion

In summary, I do not feel that an Openness view violates the intent of Scripture. I opine the Calvinistic view is the result of presuppositions imposed upon the text by a Western mentality that allow for flexibility, something that does not seem to be contentious at all with Hebrew thinking. I have attempted to show there are other options for interpreting Romans 9, which is the base for Reformed thought. These interpretations seem to me to be fair and merit more discussion.

In the final analysis I cannot view God as a popular kid on the proverbial playground. Calvinism seems to have him saying, “Billy, I want you on my team.” While at the same time saying, “No, Tommy. I don’t want you on my team.” As kids are prone to do, they stand behind God whispering in his ear, “Choose Suzy. Pick Annie. No, no, no, take Ronnie.” This is no kick ball game. The stakes are too high. I cannot envision a God so wishy-washy. Calvinists seem to be blind to this imagery of God that their view imposes. The language of Scripture is simply this. *I want every person to be on my team. Who wants to play?*