

Open Theism and  
the Undermining of  
Biblical Christianity

# BEYOND THE BOUNDS

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# THE RABBIS AND THE CLAIMS OF OPENNESS ADVOCATES

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The Old Testament is the battleground in the theological struggle between the advocates of the openness view of God and the advocates of the traditional view of God. The openness view, a recent and rare position,<sup>1</sup> challenges important, vital, and cherished teachings about the character and nature of God. It represents a seismic shift not only in theology but also in history and in exegesis. Because its teachings and implications are so thoroughgoing and so far-reaching,<sup>2</sup> Christians must weigh its claims carefully and test its doctrines meticulously. Both sides of the dispute, to be sure, lay claim to the Bible—especially the Old Testament—to substantiate their position. To validate the claims of the openness view, then, one may appeal to a disinterested third party, like a referee, an umpire, or a judge to evaluate impartially the evidence. Because the Old Testament is the common possession of Christians and Jews, and because the Old Testament is in the front lines of this conflict, the early Rabbis of the Talmud and the Midrash, like a referee or a judge,

<sup>1</sup> Gregory Boyd, for instance, states, “Still, I must concede that the open view has been relatively rare in church history. In my estimation this is because almost from the start the church’s theology was significantly influenced by Plato’s notion that God’s perfection must mean that he is in every respect unchanging—including in his knowledge and experience. This philosophical assumption has been losing its grip on Western minds over the last hundred years, which is, in part, why an increasing number of Christians are coming to see the significance of the biblical motif of divine openness” (*God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 2000], 115).

<sup>2</sup> See part 4 of this volume, “What Is at Stake in the Openness Debate?”

can test the historical, exegetical, and theological claims and teachings of the openness view. Under Rabbinic scrutiny and examination, however, the openness view fails, its lethal errors exposed, its inaccurate claims concerning history, theology, and exegesis repudiated.

## II. HISTORICAL CLAIMS OF THE OPENNESS VIEW

Advocates of the openness view, of course, will immediately object, challenging the impartiality of the Rabbis. Indeed, John Sanders, an advocate for the openness view, claims that Greek philosophy influenced both Christian and Jewish thinking about God. Sanders, who insists that “Hellenistic rational theology . . . had a profound impact on Jewish and Christian thinking about the divine nature,” writes:

Where does this “theologically correct” view of God come from? The answer, in part, is found in the way Christian thinkers have used certain Greek philosophical ideas. Greek thought has played an extensive role in the development of the traditional doctrine of God. But the classical view of God worked out in the Western tradition is at odds at several key points with a reading of the biblical text. . . .<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, Sanders claims that Philo, the first-century Jewish Hellenist, bridged the gap between Greek philosophy and the Old Testament, profoundly affecting Jewish and Christian theology. “Philo of Alexandria,” says Sanders, “was a Jewish thinker who sought to reconcile biblical teaching with Greek philosophy. To him goes the distinction of being the leading figure in forging the biblical-classical synthesis. Both the method and the content of this synthesis were closely followed by later Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, Sanders’s historical claims—of Greek philosophical influence and of Philo’s role in transmitting Greek thought to Judaism—allegedly disqualify the Rabbis as impartial judges.

Modern Rabbinic authorities, however, deny that Greek philosophy influenced the Rabbis. They were not philosophers, nor students of phi-

<sup>3</sup> John Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” in Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 68, 59. Boyd persistently argues that Plato influenced the classical (traditional) view of God. See, for example, Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 115, 130-132.

<sup>4</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 69; cf. 72.

losophy, having only limited or casual interest in the subject,<sup>5</sup> as the Reformed (liberal) C. G. Montefiore asserts:

Another point to remember in regard to Rabbinic literature is that it comes from men whose outlook was extraordinarily limited. They had no interests outside Religion and the Law. They had lost all historic sense. They had no interest in art, in drama, in *belles lettres*, in poetry, or in science (except, perhaps, in medicine). They had no training in philosophy. How enormously they might have benefited if, under competent teachers, they had been put through a course of Greek philosophy and literature. . . . The Old Testament was practically the only book they possessed . . . Yet this Bible, with all that it implied, is their world, their one overmastering interest. They picked up, it is true, many current ideas, opinions, superstitions, in a fluid, unsystematic form. But all *that* was by the way and incidental. . . . The Rabbis, for good or for evil, knew no philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

From the other side of the theological aisle, the Orthodox H. Loewe concurs: “The dialectics which Halakah involved made up, to no small extent, for the lack of philosophy. The Rabbis were no philosophers . . . and, as Mr Montefiore says, their outlook was limited. . . . They had but a casual acquaintance with Greek thought.”<sup>7</sup>

This casual acquaintance, of course, had no discernable influence on the Rabbis. Abraham Cohen speculates that although some Rabbis may have been aware of Greek philosophy, “the interest in metaphysical speculation which characterized the thinkers of Greece and Rome was not shared by the teachers of Israel to any great extent.”<sup>8</sup> G. F. Moore cannot find Greek philosophy in Rabbinic thought: “The idea of God in Judaism is developed from the Scriptures. The influence of contemporary philosophy which is seen in some Hellenistic Jewish writings—the Wisdom of Solomon, 4 Maccabees, and above all in Philo—is not recognizable in normative Judaism, nor is the influence of other religions. . . .”<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Adin

<sup>5</sup> Max Kadushin, *The Rabbinic Mind*, 2nd ed. (New York: Blaisdell, 1965), 273; Efraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs*, trans. I. Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), 29.

<sup>6</sup> C. G. Montefiore, in C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: Meridian, 1960), xix-xx, xlii. The emphasis is his.

<sup>7</sup> H. Loewe, in *ibid.*, xcv.

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud* (New York: Schocken, 1975), 27.

<sup>9</sup> George Foot Moore, *Judaism*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1927), 115.

Steinsaltz declares: “Some of the mishnaic and talmudic sages were acquainted with Greek and classical literature, but this knowledge had almost no impact on their way of thinking where talmudic scholarship was concerned. In this they differed greatly from Egyptian Jewry which tried to combine Greek culture with Judaism.”<sup>10</sup> Saul Lieberman, arguably the greatest Rabbinic authority of the last century and a leading expert on Hellenistic influence in Judaism, admits that some purely Greek ideas penetrated into Rabbinic circles, but these were limited to ethical principles and Greek legal thought.<sup>11</sup> Rabbinic literature, for example, abounds with Greek and Roman legal terms, and quotes verbatim from Gentile law books.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Lieberman emphatically rejects the influence of Greek philosophy on Rabbinic thought. The Rabbis never quote a Greek philosopher, never use Greek philosophic terms,<sup>13</sup> and they mention only one prominent Greek philosopher: Epicurus, the embodiment of infidelity and “symbol of heresy,” whose views the Rabbis regarded as worse than atheism, and whose advocates the Rabbis excluded from the world to come.<sup>14</sup> Lieberman concludes: “They [the Rabbis] probably did not read Plato and certainly not the pre-Socratic philosophers. Their main interest was centered in Gentile legal studies and their methods of rhetoric.”<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the Rabbis distrust, resist, and even despise Greek philosophy. The Talmud, for instance, indicates the proper time to study Greek philosophy:

Ben Damah the son of Rabbi Ishmael’s sister once asked Rabbi Ishmael, May one such as I who have studied the whole of the Torah learn Greek wisdom? He thereupon read to him the following verse, *This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth, but thou shalt meditate therein day and night.* (Josh 1:8) Go then and find a time that is neither day nor night and learn then Greek wisdom.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Adin Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*, trans. Chaya Galai (New York: Basic, 1976), 99.

<sup>11</sup> Saul Lieberman, *Texts and Studies* (New York: Ktav, 1974), 217, 225-226.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 225-226.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 223. Lieberman confirms the observation of Harry A. Wolfson, the distinguished Harvard historian: “In the entire Greek vocabulary that is embodied in the Midrash, Mishnah, and the Talmud there is not a single technical [Greek] philosophic term” (Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo*, vol. 1 [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948], 91-92).

<sup>14</sup> Lieberman, *Texts and Studies*, 222-223. The Rabbis also mention Oenomaus, an obscure second-century Cynic philosopher, and regard him as the greatest Gentile philosopher (Genesis Rabbah lxviii 20). Clearly, the Rabbis were not keeping close score of their Greek philosophers.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>16</sup> Menachot 99b.

Other Rabbis were more to the point, equating the breeding of swine to the learning of Greek philosophy: “Cursed be the man who would breed swine and cursed be the man who would teach his son Greek wisdom.”<sup>17</sup> The Rabbis distrusted Greek philosophy, with its naturalism and rationalism, because it threatened religious faith and eroded traditional Rabbinic training. One Rabbi reported: “There were a thousand pupils in my father’s school, of whom five hundred studied Torah and five hundred studied Greek philosophy; and from them none were left but myself and my nephew.”<sup>18</sup> The Rabbis even exclude the Epicureans, who deny providence, from the world to come.<sup>19</sup> Cohen well summarizes the Rabbinic attitude toward Greek philosophy: “So far as Greek thought [philosophy] is concerned, there is almost unanimity against it.”<sup>20</sup>

This hostility, of course, arises from their differences. Greek philosophers trusted in reason and the senses; the Rabbis trusted in God and the Prophets. Greek philosophers believed in a pagan god subject to law, nature, and fate; the Rabbis, in the God who transcended all these. Greek philosophers connected God to the world pantheistically or semi-pantheistically; the Rabbis separated God from his creation. Greek philosophers rejected supernaturalism, providence, and creation *ex nihilo*; the Rabbis heartily embraced them all. The occasional similarity—the notion of divine perfections or of certain monotheistic ideas—is coincidence or, more likely, the result of general revelation (Rom. 1:18ff). In the end, Greek philosophy and Rabbinic thought are like oil and water, like iron and clay: they cannot mix, they cannot adhere.

Historians are just as emphatic as the Rabbis and modern Rabbinic authorities in rejecting Sanders’s claim. Solomon Grayzel, for instance, writes:

For the Jews of Judea did not come in touch with the highest Greek civilization, not even with as high a Greek culture as surrounded the Jews of Alexandria. Even if they had met the real Greek culture, that

<sup>17</sup> Baba Qamma 82b.

<sup>18</sup> Baba Qamma 83a and Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 27. The antecedent of “from them” is somewhat unclear. It may refer to the one thousand pupils, or more likely from the context, it refers to the five hundred pupils who studied Greek philosophy (so Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 178). The Rabbis forbid the teaching of Greek wisdom to children, though exceptions were allowed. See Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary in America, 1962), 100-104.

<sup>19</sup> Sanhedrin 10.1.

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 178.

of the famous Greek philosophers and poets, the Jews would still have rejected it as inferior to the culture of Judaism, though they might have had some respect for it.<sup>21</sup>

Likewise, G. F. Moore, also a historian of religion, states:

The Jewish conception of God is derived from the Bible, and from the purest and most exalted teachings of the Bible, such as are found in Exod 33ff, Hosea, Deuteronomy, Jeremiah, Isaiah 40-5, and the Psalms. Monotheism was reached, as has been already observed, not from reflections on the unity of nature or of being, but from the side of God's moral rule in history, and it has therefore a more consistently personal character than where the idea of unity has been derived from physical or metaphysical premises.<sup>22</sup>

Allen R. Brockway rejects Greek philosophical influence, in particular Plato's influence, on the Rabbis: "The rabbis who re-invented Judaism during the second century did so, not on the basis of Platonism, but on grounds of a new intellectual contention. They held that the categories of purity established in their oral teachings as well as the Scriptures were the very structures according to which God conducted the world."<sup>23</sup> The Qumran discoveries only solidify these sentiments, as Emil Schürer confirms: "Moreover, recent research has shown that the Rabbis possessed an undeniable but limited knowledge of Greek culture. . . . The evidence emerging from the manuscript discoveries in the Judaeen Desert largely confirms the conclusions reached so far."<sup>24</sup>

Since Greek philosophy did not influence the Rabbis, Philo cannot bridge Greek philosophy with Rabbinic theology, thus wrecking Sanders's second historical claim. Philo, in fact, had little or no influence on the Rabbis. "Philo's ultimate influence was considerable," writes historian Jenny Morris, "but not, as far as one can discern, on Jewish thought. . . .

<sup>21</sup> Solomon Grayzel, *A History of the Jews* (New York: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1947), 48.

<sup>22</sup> George Foot Moore, *History of Religions*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 69.

<sup>23</sup> Jacob Neusner, Alan J. Avery-Peck, William S. Green, eds., *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 48. Contrast this statement with Boyd's lament of Plato's influence on classical theism (Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 115, 130-132).

<sup>24</sup> Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.–A.D. 135)*, rev. and ed. G. Vermes, F. Millar, and M. Black, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 78.

Jewish literature written in Greek was to be of minimal interest to the rabbinic schools of Palestine after the fall of the Temple.”<sup>25</sup> Similarly, G. F. Moore asserts: “Neither his [Philo’s] conception of a transcendent God, nor the secondary god, the Logos, by which he bridges the gulf he has created between pure Being and the phenomenal world, and between God so conceived and man, had any effect on the theology of Palestinian Judaism.”<sup>26</sup> The Rabbis even disregard Philo’s exposition of biblical law.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the Rabbis simply ignore Philo, as Ronald Williamson indicates: “His [Philo’s] life and works have a significant place within the history of Judaism (though for a long time not recognized by Judaism). . . .”<sup>28</sup> That is, the Rabbis did not recognize Philo. Harry A. Wolfson asserts that the Rabbis knew Philo (and Greek philosophy) only from hearsay.<sup>29</sup> Rabbinic Judaism refused not only to read Philo but also to preserve his writings, as Seymour Feldman relates: “Nevertheless, it must be admitted that Philo’s project had little impact upon Jews and Judaism. . . . So complete was the Rabbinic commitment to systematic purity at the expense of Platonism that Philo’s own work was not preserved within Judaism but only became known as a result of the work of Christian copyists.”<sup>30</sup> While Sanders celebrates Philo as “the leading figure in forging the biblical-classical synthesis . . . followed by later Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers,”<sup>31</sup> the Rabbis, in fact, snubbed him.

To buttress his historical claim that classical theism is the product of a classical-biblical synthesis, Sanders appeals to two authorities who, he argues, defend this synthesis: the late philosopher and theologian H. P. Owen, and the eminent patristics scholar G. L. Prestige.<sup>32</sup> Owen, to be sure, occasionally agrees with the openness view. He seems to deny, based on philosophical reasoning, God’s foreknowledge of future free actions, for example.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, he denies, or at least redefines, divine

<sup>25</sup> Jenny Morris, in *ibid.*, vol. 3.2, 888-889.

<sup>26</sup> Moore, *Judaism*, 1:212.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>28</sup> Ronald Williamson, *Jews in the Hellenistic World: Philo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 306.

<sup>29</sup> Wolfson, *Philo*, 1:91.

<sup>30</sup> Neusner, et al., *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism*, 2:711.

<sup>31</sup> Sanders, “Historical Considerations,” 69.

<sup>32</sup> John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 307.

<sup>33</sup> H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), 30-33, 144.

immutability.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, Sanders misleads when he quotes Owen—“So far as the Western world is concerned, theism has a double origin: the Bible and Greek philosophy”—and then states: “Classical theism is the product of the ‘biblical-classical synthesis.’”<sup>35</sup> Owen is not saying that Greek philosophy corrupted scriptural teaching, as Sanders clearly implies in his citing of Owen, but that the Fathers and Philo used Greek philosophy for expression and for amplification of the divine attributes that the Scriptures teach. Owen writes, “All the divine properties I named in the preceding paragraph [infinite, self-existence, incorporeality, eternity, immutability, impassibility, simplicity, perfection, omniscience, and omnipotence] are implied in the Bible; but the expression and, still more, the amplification of them were due to the influence of Greek philosophy.”<sup>36</sup> To say that the Fathers (not the Rabbis) used Greek philosophical vocabulary and concepts to explain scriptural truths accurately reflects Owen, but to say or to imply that Greek philosophy distorted or corrupted scriptural truths misrepresents Owen.<sup>37</sup> Owen even equates classical theism with Christian theism because “it arose within the context of orthodox belief in Biblical revelation.”<sup>38</sup> Clearly, Owen believes that classical theism (or Christian theism) comes from biblical revelation.

Similarly, Sanders misreads and misrepresents G. L. Prestige. Prestige never claims that the Fathers derived their theism from a classical-biblical synthesis. In fact, he states that the Fathers inherited Hebrew theism<sup>39</sup> and that the “main trunk of the Christian idea of God,” that is, the divine perfections, which Prestige and the Fathers called transcen-

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>35</sup> Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 141. By “classical,” Sanders means Greek theism; Owen usually means traditional or standard theism, not just Greek theism, but occasionally he interchanges the terms “classical theism” and “Christian theism” (Owen, *Concepts of Deity*, 2).

<sup>36</sup> Owen, *Concepts of Deity*, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Owen differs with Aquinas on occasion, usually on philosophical grounds, but I cannot find a statement where Owen states or implies that Greek philosophy has perverted the biblical teachings of the Fathers.

<sup>38</sup> Owen, *Concepts of Deity*, 2. Owen’s three other arguments are: “Secondly, although there are extensive parallels to many aspects of Christian theism in the writings of non-Jewish and non-Christian philosophers in the ancient world, there are some aspects that seem to be unparalleled. . . . Thirdly, even where there are parallels there is nothing in any non-Christian source that is philosophically comparable to the statements of theism given by Aquinas and those Christian thinkers who are directly or indirectly indebted to him. Fourthly (and consequently), throughout the Christian era non-Christian philosophers, as well as Christian ones, have almost always discussed theism in one or other of its Christian formulations” (ibid.). Owen defines classical theism “as belief in one God, the Creator, who is infinite, self-existent, incorporeal, eternal, immutable, impassible, simple, perfect, omniscient and omnipotent” (ibid., 1).

<sup>39</sup> G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), xviii.

dence, comes from the Hebrew Prophets<sup>40</sup> not from Plato.<sup>41</sup> Owen does not support Sanders's historical claims; Prestige refutes them—Sanders has fallen on his own sword.

Sanders's historical claims and appeals are hopeless, in whole and in part. They should raise the eyebrows, if not the hackles, of historians. These errors are serious, ominous with implications and grave with consequences for the openness view.

### III. THEOLOGICAL CLAIMS OF THE OPENNESS VIEW

One such consequence is that their theological claims are partially joined at the hip to their historical claims. The openness view, in fact, recognizes and concedes that Judaism and Christianity maintain the traditional view of God. This concession, however, is potentially embarrassing—have virtually all Jews and virtually all Christians throughout history misread the Old Testament? To explain their concession and to avoid this embarrassment, openness advocates thus advance a historical argument appealing to the influence of Greek philosophy. Their argument, though implied, is clear: if the Rabbis and church fathers had followed the Bible instead of Greek philosophy, they too would have embraced an open view of God. But this explanation has already failed because their historical argument has completely collapsed.

Still, it is helpful to observe the insuperable chasm between Rabbinic theology and openness theology, because the same chasm separates traditional Christian theology from openness theology. Moreover, it is helpful to understand the actual source of Rabbinic theology, because Rabbinic theology and traditional Christian theology drink from the same well. Modern Rabbinic authorities describe the Rabbinic view of divine providence, foreknowledge, and even foreordination, in words that would bring a smile to the divines of Dordt or Westminster. Kaufmann Kohler, for example, depicts God's sovereign rule over human affairs as follows:

. . . God is Ruler of a moral government. Thus He directs all the acts of men toward the end which He has set. Judaism is most sharply contrasted with heathenism at this point. Heathenism either deifies nature

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, xx, 26.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

or merges the deity into nature. Thus there is no place for a God who knows all things and provides for all in advance. . . . On the other hand, Judaism sees in all things, not the fortuitous dealings of a blind and relentless fate, but the dispensations of a wise and benign Providence. It knows of no event which is not foreordained by God. . . . A divine preordination decides a man's choice of his wife and every other important step of his life.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, G. F. Moore describes the Rabbinic view of God's providence most compellingly and appropriately:

Nothing in the universe could resist God's power or thwart his purpose. His knowledge embraced all that was or is or is to be. . . . The history of the world is his great plan, in which everything moves to the fulfillment of his purpose, the end that is in his mind. Not only the great whole, but every moment, every event, every individual, every creature is embraced in this plan, and is an object of his particular providence. All man's ways are directed by God (Ps 37, 23; Prov 20, 24). A man does not even hurt his finger without its having been proclaimed above that he should do so.<sup>43</sup>

The tension between divine sovereignty and free will in Rabbinic theology does not, however, lessen God's foreordination or foreknowledge:

That man is capable of choosing between right and wrong and of carrying the decision into action was not questioned, nor was any conflict discovered between this freedom of choice with its consequences and the belief that all things are ordained and brought to pass by God in accordance with his wisdom and his righteous and benevolent will.<sup>44</sup>

Likewise, Efraim Urbach declares, "The Gemara deduces . . . that the deeds of man that are performed with understanding and in conformity with the laws of ethics and the precepts of religion can assure the desired results only if they accord with the designs of Providence, 'which knoweth what the future holds.'"<sup>45</sup> And finally, Alan J. Avery-Peck writes:

<sup>42</sup> Kaufmann Kohler, *Jewish Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), 167-170.

<sup>43</sup> Moore, *Judaism*, 1:115, 384-385.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:454.

<sup>45</sup> Urbach, *The Sages*, 266.

While thus avowing the existence of free will, the rabbis generally focus on the idea that, from the beginning, God knew how things would turn out, such that all is predestined. This idea emerges from the comprehension that the world was created as a cogent whole, with its purpose preexisting the actual creation. The rabbis thus understand all that was needed to accomplish God's ultimate purpose has [*sic*] having been provided from the beginning of time. . . . In the Rabbinic view, there are no surprises for God. All is in place and ready for the preordained time to arrive.<sup>46</sup>

Calvin and Knox could hardly ask for more.

But the Rabbis are their own best witnesses. The Rabbis testify that God foreknows all things. "Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given," says Rabbi Akiba,<sup>47</sup> whom Tanchuma bar Abba echoes: "All is foreseen before the Holy One, blessed be He."<sup>48</sup> Rabbi Hanina states: "Everything is in the hands of heaven except the fear of God."<sup>49</sup> And Rabbi Joshua ben Hananiah responds in a similar way to the Romans:

The Romans asked R Joshua b. Hananiah: Whence do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, will resurrect the dead and knows the future? [After quoting Deut 31:16, which foretells many future free actions] He replied: Then at least you have the answer to half, viz., that He knows the future.<sup>50</sup>

According to the Rabbis, God foreknows a man's thoughts before he thinks them or even before he exists. Rabbi Haggai in the name of Rabbi Isaac says, "Before thought is formed in the heart of man, it already is revealed before you."<sup>51</sup> Likewise, Rabbi Yudan says, "Before a creature is actually created, his thought is already revealed before you."<sup>52</sup> Rabbi

<sup>46</sup> Neusner, et al., *The Encyclopaedia of Judaism*, 1:317, 319.

<sup>47</sup> Aboth 3.15. J. Israelstam comments aptly: "The verb *sfh* often means *looking ahead* in time or distance. When this is said of God, '*foreseen*' is, strictly speaking, not applicable or admissible, as God is independent of time and space, i.e., there is with Him neither past nor future nor distance, and He 'sees' everything at once" (J. Israelstam in I. Epstein, *The Babylonian Talmud* tractate *Aboth* [London: Soncino Press, 1935], 38).

<sup>48</sup> Tanchuma, Shelach 9.

<sup>49</sup> Niddah 16b.

<sup>50</sup> Sanhedrin 90b.

<sup>51</sup> Genesis Rabbah ix 3.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Eleazar ben Pedath teaches that, unlike man, God judges perfectly through his foreknowledge:

Unless a mortal hears the pleas that a man can put forward, he is not able to give judgment. With God, however, it is not so; before a man speaks, He already knows what is in his heart. . . . He understands even before the thoughts have been created in man's mind. You will find that seven generations before Nebuchadnezzar was born, Isaiah already prophesied what would be in his heart. . . . Surely, if God could foresee seven generations before, what he would think, shall He not know what the righteous man thinks on the same day?<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, God foreknows man's deeds. Rabbi Abbahu says, "At the beginning of the act of creating the world, the Holy One, blessed be he, foresaw the deeds of the righteous and of the wicked."<sup>54</sup> God foreknows, based on his foreordination, even mundane events, such as marrying a woman or purchasing a field. Rab Judah says:

Forty days before the embryo is formed an echo issues forth on high announcing, "The daughter of So-and-so is to be a wife to So-and-so. Such and such a field is to belong to So-and-so" . . . as is illustrated by what occurred to Raba, who overheard a certain fellow praying for grace saying: "May that girl be destined to be mine!" Said Raba to the man: "Pray not grace thus; if she be meet for you, you will not lose her, and if not, you have challenged Providence." . . . Thus said Rab . . . from the Torah, from the Prophets and from the Hagiographa it may be shown that a woman is [destined to] a man by God.<sup>55</sup>

In fact, God foreknows and foreordains even the most insignificant events: "No man bruises his finger here on earth unless it was so decreed against him in heaven."<sup>56</sup>

Yet, the question remains: Where did the Rabbis get these views? Greek philosophy was a false guide, unable to show us the way. Perhaps another religion—Zoroastrianism, or the constantly mutating pagan

<sup>53</sup> Exodus Rabbah xxi 3.

<sup>54</sup> Genesis Rabbah ii 5.

<sup>55</sup> Moed Qatan 18b.

<sup>56</sup> Rabbi Hanina in Chullin 7b. For additional Rabbinic quotes on God's omniscience, see A. Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God* (New York: Ktav, 1968), 153-160.

religions—influenced the Rabbis? This is another false notion, without advocate or evidence. But surely we are kidding ourselves. One needs only to grasp keenly the obvious to answer the question. Indeed, the modern Rabbinic authorities have already instructed us in the way, having pointed us to the answer, both natural and simple—the Old Testament. This, in turn, answers a related question. Where did the Fathers and the church get their views of God? The same Old Testament, of course. The apostles simply maintained the traditional view of God, revealed to them in the Old Testament, taught to them by their rabbis, and affirmed to them by their Lord. The Fathers and Christians have believed this ever since.<sup>57</sup> Have the Rabbis misread their Old Testament for centuries? Have Christians misread the same Old Testament—and the New Testament—for centuries? Openness advocates must answer yes, but common sense, supported by the evidence, must answer no.

Openness advocates cannot sustain their claim that the Fathers incorporated Greek philosophy into the church's theology. Sanders cites no evidence; Boyd furnishes only his estimation. Granted, Sanders and Boyd appeal to a few similarities between Greek philosophy and Christian theism, but these similarities do not prove that the Fathers synthesized biblical and Greek philosophical ideas into the church. They have not proved and cannot prove their assertions. They simply beg the question. To prop up their faltering claim and to sidestep their obligation to prove their claim, Sanders and Boyd must put the infection of Greek philosophy into the church before the earliest of the Fathers. This neatly and artfully explains everything: why all the Fathers were duped, and why no evidence exists to prove when the infection occurred—everything just happened so early. The claims of Sanders and Boyd are more like a modern conspiracy theory—the lack of evidence only confirms the conspiracy—than actual history.

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<sup>57</sup> This is clearly the view of G. L. Prestige: "I have not given any assessment of the Hebrew theism which Christianity inherited. It lies outside my scope, and must for present purposes be taken for granted. My readers will, however, detect repeated signs that it formed the basis of patristic theism. In fact, these chapters really show how Hebrew theism looked to sympathetic Hellenistic minds" (Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*, xviii). This Hebrew theism, moreover, came from the Prophets: ". . . how early Christendom sought both to establish and safeguard the supremacy of God in ways appropriate to a people trained to think in the schools of Greek philosophy, from which modern European thought is derived, and also to present the truth of His spiritual nature and moral holiness, which had been taught by the Hebrew prophets as corollary to His divine power. God was firmly held to be supernatural in the deepest and truest sense. Philosophically, this idea was expressed by the word *huproche*, which may fairly be translated transcendence" (ibid., 25). Prestige equates transcendence with infinite perfection (ibid., xx).

## IV. EXEGETICAL CLAIMS OF THE OPENNESS VIEW

Of course, openness theology hinges on their distinctive interpretation of anthropomorphisms.<sup>58</sup> Boyd defines the openness hermeneutic as follows:

First, there are certainly passages in the Bible that are figurative and portray God in human terms. You can recognize them, because what is said about God is either ridiculous if taken literally, or because the genre of the passage is poetic. However, there is nothing ridiculous or poetic about the way the Bible repeatedly speaks about God changing his mind, regretting decisions, or thinking and speaking about the future in terms of possibilities.<sup>59</sup>

At first glance, the Rabbis seem to agree with Boyd. Rabbi Aibu, for instance, said: “God said, I made a mistake that I created the evil principle in man, for had I not done so, he would not have rebelled against me.”<sup>60</sup> Another Rabbi describes God as “regretting the evil inclination, and saying, ‘What damage have I wrought! I regret that I have created it in my world.’”<sup>61</sup> Here at last, the openness advocates perhaps might claim Rabbinic support.

But not quite. First, openness advocates, unlike the Rabbis, artificially distinguish between physical anthropomorphisms and nonphysical anthropomorphisms (anthropopathisms). The openness advocates reject physical depictions of God, understanding them anthropomorphically, but they accept mental and emotional depictions of God (anthropopathisms), understanding them literally. The Rabbis, however, recognize no such subtlety. In fact, Rabbinic literature, especially Midrash, relishes anthropomorphisms, physical and nonphysical, even to excess: God is the best man in Adam’s wedding; he mourns the destruction of the flood, like a father over a son; he negotiates with Abraham over the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, telling Abraham to correct him and to teach him, and he will do as Abraham

<sup>58</sup> Of course, this is not the only exegetical error of the openness view. Bruce Ware cogently demonstrates that openness exegesis, if consistently applied, compromises God’s knowledge not only of the future but also of the present and of the past (Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000], 67, 74-86).

<sup>59</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 118.

<sup>60</sup> Genesis Rabbah xxvii 4.

<sup>61</sup> Tanna de Be Eliyyahu, 62. These Rabbis, to be sure, have God confessing a mistake, something Boyd tries to dodge and duck; but unmistakably, Boyd all but asserts that God is mistaken about future free actions (Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 56, 59-62).

says. The Rabbis can even occasionally outwit God. Rabbi Eliezer, for instance, once tried every possible method of convincing his fellow Rabbis of a Halakic rule: he performed miracles, and God even spoke from heaven to confirm Rabbi Eliezer's opinion. But Rabbi Nathan responded: "We pay no attention to a heavenly voice. For already from Sinai the Law said, 'By a majority you are to decide.' (Exod 23:2) Rabbi Nathan [later] met Elijah and asked him what God did in that hour. Elijah replied, 'He [God] laughed and said, "My children have conquered me."'"<sup>62</sup> Certainly, the Rabbis did not take such Midrashic statements or anthropomorphisms literally<sup>63</sup>; the Rabbis clearly teach otherwise—God is incorporeal, immutable, and perfect in all his ways.<sup>64</sup>

But how, then, should these anthropomorphisms be understood? Modern Rabbinic authorities generally furnish two answers. First, anthropomorphisms are necessary because of the limitations of human language and of human understanding, as Loewe and Montefiore write:

We must remember that many Rabbis, in spite of their learning, were simple folk; it was with simple folk that they had to deal. Anthropomorphisms were unavoidable. But they were often mitigated by such caveats as *Kebayakol* ('If it be proper to say so'). . . . In all such cases, the Rabbis, like most teachers of religion, ascribe human methods of action to the Deity, but, concurrently with such ascription, they always maintain God's unlikeness to man—His omniscience, for example, and His foreknowledge.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps Kohler expresses the Rabbinic view best:

We cannot help attributing human qualities and emotions to Him the moment we invest Him with a moral and spiritual nature. When we speak of His punitive justice, His unfailing mercy, or His all-wise providence, we transfer to Him, imperceptibly, our own righteous indignation at the sight of a wicked deed, or our own compassion with the sufferer, or even our own mode of deliberation and decision. Moreover, the prophets and the Torah, in order to make God plain to

<sup>62</sup> Baba Mesia 59b.

<sup>63</sup> For a fuller discussion of the nature of anthropomorphic language in Scripture, see the essays by A. B. Caneday and Michael Horton in this volume.

<sup>64</sup> For God's infinite perfections, see Marmorstein, *The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, 148-217; and Cohen, *Everyman's Talmud*, 1-26.

<sup>65</sup> Loewe (xcvi) and Montefiore (36) in *A Rabbinic Anthology*.

the people, described Him in vivid images of human life, with anger and jealousy as well as compassion and repentance, and also with the organs and functions of the senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, speaking, and walking. The Rabbis are all the more emphatic in their assertions that the Torah merely intends to assist the simple-minded, and that unseemly expressions concerning Deity are due to the inadequacy of language, and must not be taken literally. “It is an act of boldness allowed only to the prophets to measure the Creator by the standard of the creature,” says the Haggadist. . . .<sup>66</sup>

Second, these anthropomorphisms reflect the Rabbinic doctrine of the “imitation of God,” which portrays God as obeying his own commandments, studying Torah, praying to himself, and wearing phylacteries and prayer-shawls, so that his people can imitate his ways.<sup>67</sup> Thus, anthropomorphisms help us to recognize and to follow God, bringing God near to man, and assisting man to become like God.

The Rabbis, in fact, explain their anthropomorphisms. Ishmael ben Elisha states, “We borrow terms from His creatures to apply to Him in order to assist the understanding.”<sup>68</sup> Moreover, as noted above by Montefiore, the Rabbis frequently temper or soften the bolder anthropomorphisms with the disclaimer, “If it is proper to say so.” Rabbi Judah, for example, in commenting on Zechariah 2:8, says: “It does not say ‘the apple of the eye,’ but ‘the apple of His eye,’ that is, of God’s eye, for, if it is proper to say so, the Scripture refers to Him who is above, only that it paraphrases [to avoid too great an anthropomorphism].”<sup>69</sup> The Rabbis also refer to a biblical anthropomorphism, but stress God’s unlikeness to man:

A human king goes forth to war, and the provinces by which he passed draw near to him, and tell him their needs, but they are told, “He is

<sup>66</sup> Kohler, *Jewish Theology*, 76.

<sup>67</sup> Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, 7-8. As for these seemingly irreverent anthropomorphisms of the Midrash, Montefiore explains: “The naïve, but daring, anthropomorphism(s) . . . may seem almost flippant to modern readers. The apparent flippancy is not due to any Rabbinic lack of deep reverence for God or of fervent love; it may rather be said that this very reverence and love produced a certain intimate familiarity, which may be compared to the familiarity of a loving son who is on very intimate terms with his father, and can even make jokes about him to his face” (Montefiore, *A Rabbinic Anthology*, 341).

<sup>68</sup> Mekhilta xix 19.

<sup>69</sup> Sifre Numbers, Beha’aloteka, 84. Montefiore (*A Rabbinic Anthology*, 64) supplies the bracketed phrase.

excited, he is going forth to war; when he returns victorious, come then, and ask of him your needs.” But God is not like that. The Lord is a man of war, He fights against the Egyptians; but the Lord is his name. . . .<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, the Tiqqune Sopherim and the Targums, with their tendency to remove or to mollify anthropomorphisms, indicate that the Rabbis understood them figuratively.

Accordingly, the Rabbis understand anthropomorphisms, such as God’s regretting, figuratively. Commenting on Genesis 6:6, Ramban (Nachmanides), a Rabbinic commentator of the Scriptures, writes: “The Torah speaks in the language of men. The purport is that they rebelled, and grieved his Holy Spirit with their sins.” Similarly, Ibn Ezra and Rambam (Maimonides), also Rabbinic commentators, interpret the passage anthropomorphically. The Mishnah relates that God created the rainbow on the eve of the first Sabbath because God foreknew the flood, as Alan J. Avery-Peck states:

For instance, rather than God’s surprise at human sinfulness, described at Gen. 6:5-6, which leads God to bring a flood (Gen 6:6), the rabbis understand the rainbow to have been created before the first Sabbath. This means that God already knew that people would sin, that there would be a flood, and that, afterwards, God would promise never again to destroy the earth and would offer the rainbow as a sign of that commitment. In the Rabbinic view, there are no surprises for God.<sup>71</sup>

Boyd’s comment on Genesis 6:6—“Doesn’t the fact that God regretted the way things turned out (to the point of starting over) suggest that it *wasn’t* a foregone conclusion at the time God created human beings that they would fall into this state of wickedness?”<sup>72</sup>—mirrors the argument of a Gentile who denied God’s foreknowledge to Rabbi Joshua ben Qorha:

Gentile: Do you not maintain that the Holy One, blessed be he, sees what is going to happen?

Rabbi: Indeed so.

<sup>70</sup> Mekhilta (Lauterbach, vol. 2), 32-34.

<sup>71</sup> Alan J. Avery-Peck, in Neusner, et al., *Encyclopaedia of Judaism*, 1:318-319.

<sup>72</sup> Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 55.

Gentile: But lo it is written, And it grieved him in his heart (Gen 6:6).

Rabbi: Did you ever have a son?

Gentile: Yes.

Rabbi: And what did you do?

Gentile: I was happy, and I made everybody happy.

Rabbi: But did you not know that in the end he would die?

Gentile: Rejoice in the time of joy, mourn in the time of mourning.

Rabbi: And that is the way things are done before the Holy One, blessed be he. For R Joshua b Levi said, “For seven days the Holy One, blessed be he, went into mourning for his world before he brought the flood, as it is said, And it grieved him in his heart (Gen 6:6), and further it says, For the king grieved for his son (2 Sam 19:3).”<sup>73</sup>

In short, the Rabbis interpret Genesis 6:6 anthropomorphically, without rejecting God’s foreknowledge.<sup>74</sup>

Certainly, the Rabbis and modern Rabbinic authorities understand human descriptions of God anthropomorphically. They do not distinguish between physical and nonphysical anthropomorphisms. They do not contradict their theology by their exegesis. They simply communicate about God as anyone must, by using human language analogously to communicate divine and spiritual realities.

## V. CONCLUSION

Clearly, Christians must reject the claims of the openness view: its historical claims are misinformed—the Rabbis follow Moses and Isaiah, not Plato and Aristotle; its theology is misguided—the Rabbis maintain that God foresees and foreordains even future free actions; and its exegesis is

<sup>73</sup> Genesis Rabbah xxvii 6.

<sup>74</sup> The Rabbis interpret other passages, for example, Genesis 22:12—“Because now I know that you fear God”—as God’s foreknowledge actualized. Rambam states: “At the beginning Abraham’s fear of God was latent; it had not become actualized through such a great deed, but now it was known in actuality, and his merit was perfect, and his reward would be complete from the Eternal, the God of Israel.” Rashi and Nachmanides interpret Genesis 22:12 likewise.

mistaken—the Rabbis interpret anthropomorphisms figuratively. In the end, the openness view requires too much. It requires us to believe that Christians and Jews have misunderstood history, theology, and exegesis for thousands of years. It requires a new history and a new exegesis to support its new theology. It then requires a new hymnbook, a new prayer book, and a new liturgy. Next it requires a new Bible, and finally, a new God. It requires too much; it supplies too little. Instead of requiring a new religion, let us reject the claims and the teachings of the openness view, and let us maintain those cherished and precious scriptural truths of God's infinite knowledge and perfections that have always comforted and consoled his saints. Here, we will find rest for our souls.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> I would like to thank Bruce Ware and Stephen Wellum, my colleagues, for their helpful suggestions.