



Four Views on Divine Providence

Dennis Jowers (Editor) , Gregory A. Boyd , Ron Highfield , Paul Kjoss Helseth , Stanley N. Gundry (Series Editor)

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Questions about divine providence have preoccupied Christians for generations: Are people elected to salvation? For whom did Jesus die? This book introduces readers to four prevailing views on divine providence, with particular attention to the question of who Jesus died to save (the extent of the atonement) and if or how God determines who will be saved (predestination). But this book does not merely answer readers' questions. *Four Views on Divine Providence* helps readers think theologically about all the issues involved in exploring this doctrine. The point-counterpoint format reveals the assumptions and considerations that drive equally learned and sincere theologians to sharp disagreement. It unearths the genuinely decisive issues beneath an often superficial debate. Volume contributors are Paul Helseth (God causes every creaturely event that occurs); William Lane Craig (through his 'middle knowledge,' God controls the course of worldly affairs without predetermining any creatures' free decisions); Ron Highfield (God controls creatures by liberating their decision-making); and Gregory Boyd (human decisions can be free only if God neither determines nor knows what they will be). Introductory and closing essays by Dennis Jowers give relevant background and guide readers toward their own informed beliefs about divine providence.

Four Views on Divine Providence Details

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From Reader Review Four Views on Divine Providence for online ebook

Ray Ruppert says

This was a very interesting book because it the four views of divine providence range from the solid biblical viewpoint to the outlandish and contradictory concepts of open theism. Each author states his case then the other three present a response. It was instructive to see what the proponents of the absurd had to say for themselves in contrast with the critical responses from the opposition. You must be able to analyze as you read to get the most out of this book or you will end up agreeing with each then changing your mind as the next author presents his case or rebuttal.

Dave Courtney says

Very good presentation and intro in to the constructs of Molinist and open theism. I tend towards the feeling that Boyd's and Craig's writings and responses are the most entertaining, fulfilling, challenging and provoking of the book. They happen to represent open theism. The other two are much less so, which might be a downfall for a book that is supposed to represent dialogue between the two sides. I found Helseth's critiques even less intriguing than his actual presentation, even as his presentation remained effectively narrow. But for Boyd and Craig, highly worthwhile.

Chen Ng says

The Counterpoints format serves a topic like the one dealt with in this book very well indeed. Each of the four authors is given the opportunity to set forth and develop his view of Divine Providence, followed by short contributions by the other three authors after each main essay which offer responses to each view.

Overall, the debate felt well balanced - Helseth, Craig, Highfield and Boyd are excellent scholars who handle their subject with care and precision. They are, on the whole, respectful in their critiques of one another's views while at the same not pulling any punches when it comes to theological/philosophical disagreements.

Of the four authors, I found Helseth's contribution the most frustrating, his (over)extensive use of quotations making for extremely difficult reading. Moreover, his chapter responding to Boyd's open theism view does not do so much as engage with Boyd's chapter, but rather quotes extensively from Boyd's other work (in particular, his book Satan and the Problem of Evil) and critiques that instead.

Finally, as many others have commented on in this thread, Helseth and Highfield's views are essentially the same, making the title 'Four Views' somewhat misleading - this is a discussion between a molinist, an open theist, and two Calvinists - and so we really have only three views, not four.

In his introduction and concluding remarks, Jowers does a good job introducing the views, highlighting points of agreement/disagreement, and setting the debate in its wider theological context.

All in all, this is a good read that I would highly recommend.

James Criswell says

I like the book. However, I think the non-inclusion of a simple foreknowledge w/ free will (which is how I understand most Armenians, Catholics, Eastern Orthodox) was a substantial deficit. This is particularly true given the 2 nearly identical views that represented a more Calvinist understanding that were included.

Nicholas Quient says

Boyd and Craig are the standouts here.

Jon Siskey jr. says

Excellent overview of the issue along with strong interaction between the contributors. To echo something Dr. Craig said in a podcast, I wish that they would have had a contributor who defended something of a mystery view, something to the effect of "God is sovereign, man is free, and how these things work together is just a mystery we have to live with!" Such a contributor would have been a more helpful addition than Ron Highfield, who along with espousing almost the same view as Paul Helseth, lacked the clarity and intellectual rigor of Helseth. He brought nothing original and frankly did nothing for the book. Had the book only had Boyd, Craig, and Helseth, I would have been just fine with that. Other than that, excellent work. Recommended to those interested in the issue/

Daniel says

This was a very enlightening read that helped confirm what I already suspected was true. Paul Kjos Helseth depicted a grotesque picture of God as an omni-derigent all-causing control freak who is responsible for all human action... yet then tried to claim human beings still have moral responsibility. Ron Highfield was not much better, although he denied the sort of omni-causality that Helseth proposes. However, his solution to resolving divine foreknowledge and human free will was to resort to mysticism and claiming that we can never know. It's a divine mystery that we have to accept on faith. Gregory Boyd's defence of Open Theism, whilst making a good critique of Calvinism, likewise fell flat on its face. He tried claiming that God knows all "might" counterfactuals, but not all "would/will" counterfactuals, not realising that might counterfactuals have no actual truth values, they are just indeterminate statements based on lack of knowledge. William Lane Craig's defence of Molinism, by contrast, sketched a view of divine foreknowledge and providence that was both consistent with the Bible and with human free will. Indeed, the only arguments made against his case was that he dared put philosophy and theology "ahead of what the Bible clearly says." Oh really? The Bible clearly says that Calvinism is true? What absurd nonsense! Gregory Boyd's criticisms of Molinism simply amounted to his not understanding that might counterfactuals have no truth values. All in all, Molinism remains for me the most obviously true view.

Nathan Sanders says

This book suffers from two obvious problems: the inclusion of only three views instead of four, and essays that are often too technical to be enlightening to the interested layman. On the other hand, this book boasts William Lane Craig and Greg Boyd, both leaders of their respective views, as contributing authors. The big name authors and the free-for-all debate style (each author gets an essay, followed by a short response by the others) certainly give this book some entertainment value along with high level discussion, so this book might be worth a read if you can get past its deficiencies.

The first problem is simple. Helseth and Highfield have the same view, which is divine causal determinism. Why some sort of 'simple foreknowledge' view wasn't included (shared in various flavors by Arminians, Catholics, and the Eastern and other Orthodox churches) is beyond me. There's no excuse for not including the view held by the absolutely overwhelming majority of Christendom in a volume like this one.

The latter problem is more difficult to pin down, but no less apparent as one tries to wade through the text. This book features a 'compare and contrast' approach suited for an introductory book, where beginners can read each view, read the responses, and then make up their mind. The problem is that this book is way too advanced to be intelligible by a beginner. Helseth's essay is the first, and arguably the most difficult to read for a beginner due to his use of niche theological vocabulary, which he doesn't define for the reader. Craig and Boyd contribute essays which are probably slightly too philosophically technical for a beginner, although to be fair, that's difficult to avoid due to the inherent philosophical nature of the views they espouse. Craig and Boyd's responses are another story. Expect a lot of highly technical philosophical bickering. Highfield's writing is by far the easiest to read. The heart of the issue here is that each author has two goals which are very difficult to reconcile: writing a clear and persuasive essay aimed at beginners, and writing a rigorous and technical essay to withstand scrutiny from the other authors. The latter goal almost always won out.

If you're still reading this review you've probably gotten over the two big hurdles, so this book might be worth a read for you. When I first read this book I was already fairly familiar with the views and vocabulary, ruling out the second hurdle, and I took the title at its word, ruling out the first. The second read-through many months later, I wanted to make sure I understood what was going on and relive the fireworks, and I decided it was worth the cost of reading the Calvinist view twice with Helseth and Highfield slapping each other on the back in their responses. Here are my thoughts:

Helseth's essay was ok, but could have been more readable while still retaining rigor. I thought Helseth could have more clearly distinguished his view from Craig's Molinism (Craig calls him out on this in his response), and Helseth's decision to declare the mechanism behind compatibilism as 'inscrutable' and leave it at that was extremely puzzling. Since Helseth is arguing from the wider Reformed tradition anyway, why not include a page or two on compatibilistic free will? The responses were mainly just standard anti-Calvinist objections, namely that human freedom is obliterated and that God's character is impugned.

I thought Craig's essay was surprisingly weak. His introduction to Molinism is alright; the problem is that he spends an astounding amount of his essay preemptively defending against open-theist objections. Everyone knew going into this book that Craig and Boyd would be the stars of this format, so perhaps Craig wanted to gain as much ground on his main rival as he could in his essay. Curiously, Craig barely mentioned the grounding objection to middle knowledge, and was hammered on that in the responses. Craig did have a section addressing the Reformed view, but it was limited to one particular objection and all of that objection's implications. I thought it was strange that he didn't give a more general defense.

I really do appreciate Ron Highfield, but he stuck out like a sore thumb in this book. His essay, while reverent, was lacking a fair amount in logical consistency and a bit in persuasiveness, and he was predictably shredded by Craig and Boyd in the responses. His view is basically the same as Helseth's, but with a different (and far more subjective, in my opinion) methodology used to arrive there.

Boyd did a remarkable job considering what is, in my opinion, the fatal weakness of his position, but his essay was ultimately unconvincing. He paints a very different picture of the biblical narrative than the other authors, but parts of Boyd's view are wholly unconvincing (see his 'character hardening' thesis, which get demolished by Helseth and Craig). It's a valiant effort, undone by fatally flawed view.

All things considered I suppose this review isn't too rosy, but the responses were better than the essays almost across the board. Craig and Boyd in particular get into it, and their back-and-forth is interesting if you can figure out what they're talking about. Those familiar with this topic and interested in what some influential evangelical voices have to say in an unusually candid format should give this a read. Readers who want a clear introduction to this debate should look elsewhere.

Jeff says

This was the first "Four Views" book I've read, so I'm not sure how it compares to others in this series, but on its own, this book holds its own. The book shows four different views on God's providence: how God concerns Himself with the affairs of this world and causes His will to be done through those affairs. Calvinism, Molinism, and Open Theism each have their own section. The fourth viewpoint (actually third in sequence; the Open Theism section comes last) comes from a Church of Christ scholar who attempts to construct a model of providence almost exclusively from Scripture and not from a theological framework. His view can be summarized in saying that God controls the world by liberating His people from sin through salvation.

I liked the format of the book. I ultimately found myself sharpshooting all four authors for arguments that I found lacking, particularly Helseth (the Calvinist) and Boyd (the Open Theist). William Lane Craig (whose viewpoint I very much agree with) in particular seemed to not quite answer the question in his section, giving a rousing defense of Molinism but not quite tying Molinism to providence.

In the end, this book has made me think a lot about why I agreed or disagreed with various parts of each argument, and for that, this book is a success.

Jeremiah Parker says

Two authors, Highfield and Helseth, present their view that God controls all things. Though their views differ slightly(?), neither suggests that God is evil. Both maintain that God wills all human sin. The problem of evil is resolved by denying the reality and permanence of evil. What seems to us to be evil now will, in the end, actually be seen as good.

Craig presents his version of Molinism. The idea is that prior to creation God considered all of the possible and feasible worlds inhabited by creatures who exercise libertarian freedom. He then actualized the best of all feasible worlds. Though there is evil in the world, God did not ordain it -- free creatures freely choose it. God knew how he would deal with all of it before creation.

Boyd presents his version of Open Theism. God is fighting against evil through wisdom and love. He never wills evil. God gave humans libertarian freedom. Since future decisions are not yet made, the future is partly unknowable. The problem of evil is resolved by claiming that God is currently doing his best and will ultimately be victorious in the battle against evil.

Definitely an interesting read!

Jacob O'connor says

I've always found William Lane Craig to be impressive. He introduced me to Molinism, and I'm more and more convinced of it. Craig offers the best argument of the four views represented here.

Notes:

1) God "concurs" with all secondary causes (41)

2) Craig's objection against universal, divine, causal determinism: (1) cannot offer a coherent Interpretation of Scripture (2) Determinism is self-defeating. You're either determined to accept it or you're not (3) makes God the author of sin and denies human responsibility (4) Nullifies human agency (5) makes reality into a farce (60)

3) Open theism has insuperable problems, but Boyd offers a damning critique of deterministic theodicies (297)

5) Craig, "libertarian freedom is not the possibility of choosing otherwise but rather the absence of causal constraints outside oneself that determines how one chooses" (226)

J. Eric says

Deeply philosophical...

...Not deeply enough Scriptural. This is not to say that the philosophies contained here-in are not important in their own right, but only that philosophy should be secondary to Scripture-icity where Christian theology is concerned. I did appreciate the depth of thought clearly undergone by the contributors as well as the occasional use of humor in some of the rebuttals. In the end, most readers (including myself) will probably either need to work through the material slowly in order to even grasp some of the contentions in it, or content themselves with a surface level integration of it. I went through the book quickly and thus settled for the latter option.

Pastor Matt says

A difficult read for a counterpoint entry but worth working through if you can do it. However, I would recommend familiarizing yourself with the four views of Calvinism, Arminianism, Molinism and Open

Theism before reading these four scholars interact (sometimes sharply) with each other.

Jon says

Excellent overview of the issue along with strong interaction between the contributors. To echo something Dr. Craig said in a podcast, I wish that they would have had a contributor who defended something of a mystery view, something to the effect of "God is sovereign, man is free, and how these things work together is just a mystery we have to live with!" Such a contributor would have been a more helpful addition than Ron Highfield, who along with espousing almost the same view as Paul Helseth, lacked the clarity and intellectual rigor of Helseth. He brought nothing original and frankly did nothing for the book. Had the book only had Boyd, Craig, and Helseth, I would have been just fine with that. Other than that, excellent work. Recommended to those interested in the issue/

Matt says

This is a great book that gives four potential theological stances in regards to divine providence. The four views presented are:

"God Causes All Things" by Paul Kjos Helseth
"God Directs All Things" by William Lane Craig
"God Controls By Liberating" by Ron Highfield
"God Limits His Control" by Gregory A. Boyd

For each viewpoint, an expert holding that belief describes all the reasons that he feels this is the best theological point of view. Then the other three theologians/scholars take time to respond and critique that viewpoint.

For clarity purposes, here is the structure of each section:

- 1.) Viewpoint on divine providence presented by an expert
- 2.) A critique of that viewpoint by an expert believing in a different type of theology
- 3.) A critique of that viewpoint by an expert believing in a different type of theology
- 4.) A critique of that viewpoint by an expert believing in a different type of theology

The conclusion of this book encapsulates where the four experts' thoughts overlap and where there is division in their thinking.
