

## GOD, THE BIBLE AND SPIRITUAL WARFARE: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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Many readers of these pages will know Boyd through his earlier and impressive work, *Cynic, Sage, or Son of God? Recovering the Real Jesus in an Age of Revisionist Replies* (1995). Boyd's most recent book, *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (InterVarsity, 1997), is less interested in responding to various reconstructions of the historical Jesus largely grounded in an over-dependence on Greco-Roman background tinged by philosophical naturalism than in establishing a line of thought that Boyd judges to be central in Scripture and that is largely misunderstood or distorted in contemporary evangelicalism.

There are two agendas operating in this book. On the one hand, we are treated to a Biblical theology of God as warrior, in some ways formally reminiscent of the recent book by Tremper Longman, III, and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (1995), though with a very different theology. On the other hand, Boyd offers an understanding of God and a related theodicy that are highly reminiscent of the "open God" theology advanced and defended by Clark Pinnock, Roger Olson, William Hasker and others.

In his introduction ("The Normativity of Evil Within a Warfare World-view"), Boyd reminds the reader of Daniel's experience. After praying and fasting for three weeks, Daniel was visited by an angel who told Daniel that his prayer had been heard immediately, and that the angel himself had been immediately dispatched. "Unfortunately, God's intended quick response was significantly delayed" (p. 9) by evil powers (Dan 10:12–13,20). Michael, one of the "chief princes," came to help the unfortunate angel: "Were it not for Michael, apparently, Daniel might have been waiting even longer to hear from God" (p. 10). Boyd writes:

This passage and others like it raise some questions that do not fit easily with our traditional Western theology. Do certain evil invisible cosmic beings really possess the power to disrupt a plan of God to answer a prayer? Can transcendent evil beings negatively affect us in a way that is similar to the way people who have authority over us (earthly princes) affect us? Is it really the case that whether we hear from God might have to do not only with God's will and our faith, as we Western believers customarily assume, but with the will of various created invisible beings who exist "above" us but "below" God? . . .

Obviously, a number of significant features of this passage of Scripture simply do not rest well either with the naturalistic worldview of our post-Enlightenment culture or with standard evangelical theology regarding God's

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sovereignty and angels. . . . This passage further implies that at least part of what may be in the balance, as these beings either cooperate with or resist God's will, is our welfare.

. . . While few passages are as explicit as Daniel 10, the Bible from beginning to end presupposes spiritual beings who exist "between" humanity and God and whose behavior significantly affects human existence, for better or for worse. Indeed, just such a conception, I argue in this work, lies at the center of the biblical worldview (pp. 10–11).

Boyd asserts that if we find this worldview strange, we should at least recognize that we Westerners are the odd ones out. Many peoples adopt this worldview without difficulty. Among his examples he includes the Shuar in Ecuador: "everything in the physical plane is understood against the backdrop of a highly influential, intricate and remarkably detailed spiritual world in which forces are at war with each other and through which people wage war against each other; the Shuar do not clearly differentiate these two spheres. . . . I call this basic understanding of the cosmos a *warfare worldview*" (p. 13). Then the summary: "Stated most broadly, this worldview is that perspective on reality which centers on the conviction that the good and evil, fortunate or unfortunate, aspects of life are to be interpreted largely as the result of good and evil, friendly or hostile, spirits warring against each other and against us. The central thesis of this work is that this warfare worldview is in one form or another the basic worldview of Biblical authors, both in the Old Testament and even more so in the New" (p. 13).

Boyd envisages this book as the first of two. In this one he seeks to demonstrate that the Biblical writers, "like almost all ancient peoples" (p. 22), hold a "warfare worldview." In a later work with the title *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, Boyd promises to show that the early church compromised this warfare worldview, but that if it is restored, "this warfare perspective constitutes the foundation for a theodicy that is philosophically superior to all alternatives, Christian and non-Christian alike" (p. 23).

Stylistically, the text of the book presupposes no technical knowledge. At the level of the sentence and the paragraph it is well-written, though quite frankly the argument is so repetitive that some sections are boring. Specialists may pore over the hundred pages of small-print and occasionally technical footnotes (pp. 294–395).

After the introductory chapter, Boyd's book is divided into two parts: the warfare worldview in the OT (five chapters), and the warfare worldview in the NT (five more chapters). The first chapter of the OT section serves as a preliminary apologetic for Boyd's approach. He argues that three preliminary questions must be addressed if readers are to become open to his position.

### I. THREE PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

First, the need for a "warfare perspective on suffering" will only be appreciated if one grasps "the radicality of evil in our world" (p. 32). Boyd concretizes the evil by retelling the horrific account of the Nazi blinding of Zosia, a young Jewish girl in the Warsaw ghetto (pp. 33–34). This incident

becomes a weapon in Boyd's hands throughout the rest of the book. For example, perhaps while Zosia lay on the ground screaming, two large wounds where her lovely eyes had been, some congregation was singing Sandell's hymn: "The protection of his child and treasure / Is a charge that on himself he laid. . . / Help me, Lord, when toil and trouble meeting, / E'er to take, as from a father's hand, / One by one, the day, the moments fleeting, / Till I reach the promised Land." Boyd writes: "The hymn captures poignantly the church's traditional theology of God's character, his meticulous providential care, and thus the pious resignation that, according to the classical-philosophical teaching, should characterize believers who truly trust in their heavenly Father. . . . Hymns like this one have provided peace and security to countless believers throughout the ages. But if we do not cover our ears, our singing must be haunted by Zosia's screams and the Nazis' laughter. Was Zosia not 'God's treasure'? Why was she not protected?" (p. 37). Boyd proceeds to criticize the "classical" stance, epitomized (in his argument) by Augustine and in our day by R. C. Sproul. To argue that everything is working together and fitting together under the total control of a good God is to relativize Zosia's screams.

Second, Boyd's position, he argues, will prove convincing only if one is willing to call into question some traditional ways of thinking about God. Inevitably, then, Boyd must devote quite a bit of space to questioning those "traditional" ways. For instance, he will not accept the approach to the problem of evil advanced by many—that some notion of human freedom lying at the heart of human rebellion, yet nevertheless tied to the absolute sovereignty of God, really "solves" anything, for "the maneuver simply cannot be rendered logically coherent, despite the best efforts of some of the church's best minds to make it so" (p. 48). Neither Calvinist nor Arminian theologians have adequately grasped this nettle. Indeed, one of the strongest evidences that the traditional mystery of evil is the flawed product of Western philosophy rather than a faithful reflection of Biblical theology is the fact that the problem of evil "seems to be wholly absent from the New Testament, and arguably from the whole Bible" (p. 51). Moreover, when Jesus, for instance, prays that God's will might be done on earth as in heaven, he does not adopt the view that God's absolute power means God's absolute control (p. 53). In any case, "free beings can and do genuinely affect the flow of history. When they affect the flow of things, for better or for worse, there is no necessary higher reason than what can be located within their own self-determining free decision to explain why the flow of history was affected the way it was" (p. 57). Only in this framework does it make sense to inquire "why the Creator would have created a risky world with such radical freedom as opposed to a world without it" (p. 57). But this also means "it does not make sense to look for a higher divine 'why' to explain the particular actions of any one of these free agents. It therefore does not make sense to seek for a higher 'why' in God's will to explain the occurrence of any particular evil in the world. From a warfare worldview perspective, this quest is misguided, and the unsolvable problem it generates is in fact a pseudoproblem. The only 'why' that can be found is located in the free agent who freely does what it does. . . .

From a biblical and early church perspective, evil ‘fits’ in the cosmos only by constituting that which God is unequivocally against, and that which God shall someday ultimately overcome” (p. 57).

Third, assuming, then, that “the classical-philosophical meticulous blueprint model of providence” is “seriously mistaken” (p. 58), Boyd argues that we need to re-examine “the motif of spiritual warfare in Scripture . . . as an alternative model for understanding evil” (p. 58), and we can do this only if we grasp the nature of angelic beings, fallen and unfallen. This is a barrier to many in the West, but it is essential, Boyd insists, to understanding the Scriptures. “The cosmos is, by divine choice, more of a democracy than it is a monarchy” (p. 58).

The warfare worldview thus presupposes the reality of relatively autonomous free creatures, human and angelic, who can and do act genuinely on their own, and who can and do sometimes go against God’s will. It thus presupposes the reality of radical contingency and of genuine risk. It further presupposes that this risk has sometimes gone bad, even on a cosmic scale, and that this has turned the earth into a veritable war zone (p. 58).

So Boyd devotes some pages to the existence of angels and demons, refusing to identify them exhaustively with social structures (so Bultmann, for instance, and Wink). Boyd thinks that postmodernism may help us here: It helps us cast off the naturalistic assumptions that blind us to these realities.

## II. SUMMARY OF THE REST OF BOYD’S BOOK

Considerations of space forbid that I indulge in as much detail as I summarize the rest of Boyd’s book. But perhaps I may offer a potted account. The remaining four chapters of the OT section are titled as follows.

Chap. 2: “Locking up the Raging Sea: The Hostile Environment of the Earth” (pp. 73–92). Boyd starts again with Zosia: “If one attempts to understand Zosia’s nightmare against a canvas that depicts the cosmos as meticulously controlled by an all-loving God, one must question either the genuineness of God’s love or the genuineness of the evil. But if a person views such suffering against a canvas that depicts the world as a veritable battlefield, ravaged by eons of conflict among powerful invisible forces, such suffering begins in a perverse way to make sense, for this is what war looks like” (p. 73). So Boyd seeks to show that this is the worldview of the OT. Generally speaking, he argues, this was the stance adopted in ancient Near Eastern literature. So Boyd outlines parallels and differences between what the Bible says and this background, focusing especially on the demonic in the OT, Yahweh’s “conflict with the raging sea” and the introduction of his treatment of Leviathan.

Chap. 3: “Slaying Leviathan: Cosmic Warfare and the Preservation and Restoration of Creation” (pp. 93–113). The OT appropriates the ancient Near Eastern “conception of the world as being surrounded by hostile monsters that forever seek to devour it” (p. 94). So Boyd summarizes the three “cosmic beasts,” Leviathan, Rahab and Behemoth. In particular, he insists that

these mythological monsters are connected *with creation accounts* (e.g. Job 40–41), in which God is in a battle even to bring the creation into being. How should one reconcile this with Genesis 1, which so powerfully asserts that what God made was good? After casting around a little, Boyd “tentatively proposes” that we adopt the gap theory (which he prefers to style “the restoration theory”). God fought the monsters to bring the universe into existence, and the world was without form and void, and then God won, and the result was good. So in this light, there has been warfare from creation. In this view, neither the command to subdue to the earth nor the sudden appearance of Satan in the garden is surprising: “the earth . . . is birthed, as it were, in an infected incubator. It is fashioned in a warfare context. It is itself altogether good, but it is made and preserved over and against forces that are perpetually hostile to it, just as the other creation-conflict passages of Scripture suggest” (p. 107). Yet Boyd is aware that this proposal is in part speculative, and does not want his entire position to be made dependent upon it (p. 113).

Chap. 4: “Judging ‘the Gods’: Yahweh’s Conflict with Angelic Beings in the Old Testament” (pp. 114–142). Boyd argues that in the OT God rules through the ranks of intermediaries, who may and in some cases do rebel against him. That is in part what sets up the warfare worldview.

In biblical terms, then, the cause of Zosia’s torment might be the result of evil human intentions. Or it might be due to a malicious “prince” of Germany, or even a cosmic Leviathan. But on biblical terms it could not be an ordained feature of a secret blueprint Yahweh has for the whole of world history, and for Zosia and her mother in particular. In the end, the character of God can remain untarnished in the face of the terrifying dimensions of our experience only to the degree that our view of the free, contingent world in between us and God is robust. Only to the extent that we unambiguously affirm that angels and humans have significant power to thwart God’s will and inflict suffering on others can we unambiguously affirm the goodness of God in the face of Zosia’s torture (pp. 141–142).

Chap. 5: “Rebuking the Adversary: The Activity and Origin of Satan in the Old Testament” (pp. 143–167). Among other things, this chapter looks at each OT passage that uses the word *satan*. In part, Boyd is concerned to refute the “demonic-in-Yahweh” theory that has dominated not a little contemporary scholarship for the last half century. Some of Boyd’s treatment of this is very good, not least some of his exegesis of Job 1. Nevertheless he suggests that Yahweh is surprised by Satan’s answer to the question, “Where have you come from?” (1:7), and that there is “an uncontrolled dimension to the *satan’s* activity” (p. 147). Other passages Boyd treats include Zech 3:1–10 and 1 Chron 21:1, plus a number of passages where the word *satan* is not found but comparable themes occur (e.g. Genesis 3).

The second half of the book focuses on “the warfare worldview of the New Testament.”

Chap. 6: “Tying Up the Strong Man: The Kingdom of God as a Warfare Concept” (pp. 171–191). Boyd argues that although the cosmic warfare motif is introduced in the OT, it never takes center stage there: that step is

reserved for the NT. The intertestamental period paved the way: here Boyd relies on apocalyptic literature and (in common with contemporary scholarly opinion) veers away from Zoroastrianism. From this base Boyd surveys “Jesus’ view of the Satanic army,” and introduces the notion of the kingdom of God as that which abolishes the kingdom of Satan. “It is crucial for us to recognize that Jesus’ view about the rule of Satan and the pervasive influence of his army was not simply a marginal piece of first-century apocalyptic thought that he happened to embrace. It is, rather, the driving force behind everything Jesus says and does. Indeed, Jesus’ concept of ‘the kingdom of God’ is centered on these views” (pp. 184–185). Running through the early chapters of Mark, Boyd seeks to show that the kingdom is a warfare theme.

Chapter 7: “War of the Worlds: The Warfare Theme of Jesus’ Exorcisms and Miracles” (pp. 192–214). Boyd examines two “representative examples of Jesus’ exorcism ministry” (p. 192)—viz., the casting out of “Legion” (a multitude of demons, Mark 5:1–27; Matt 8:28–34; Luke 8:27–39), and the “exorcism of a young boy” (Mark 9:14–30; Matt 17:14–21; Luke 9:37–45). In the former case, the fact that the demons reply to Jesus *after* he had commanded them to leave proves that Jesus’ initial attempt at exorcism “apparently failed” in this case, so he “investigates further (perhaps to find out more precisely what he is up against)” (p. 193). Pity, not anger, characterizes Jesus’ view of the demonized, for they are victims:

In other words, just as evil adults can and do sometimes victimize children against their will and God’s will, just as rapists victimize women against their will and against God’s will, and just as despotic political powers victimize their subjects against their will and against God’s will, so demonic spirits can apparently sometimes victimize people against their will—and against God’s will. As we have already seen, the biblical assumption is that the spiritual realm is not all that different from the physical realm. Indeed, the one is simply a continuation of the other.

This means that life on all levels can be and often is profoundly unfair. This should not surprise us, for we experience life on earth as profoundly unfair. This is the price we pay, or at least the price we risk paying, for a cosmos composed of a vast multiplicity of free, morally responsible agents (pp. 199–200).

Further: “There is no suggestion in the Gospels that Jesus believed that demons or evil angels were carrying out a secret providential plan of God, despite themselves. Rather, Jesus treated each case of demonization as an instance of spiritual rape: an alien force had illegitimately and cruelly invaded a person’s being” (p. 201). Jesus’ whole ministry did not turn on addressing the problem of evil from a theoretical standpoint, but was in fact a revolt against the tyranny of Satan and his minions. The incarnation was an act of war, an essential part of Jesus’ purpose in winning back to God that which is under the tyrannical rule of another. In this framework, Boyd rejects any view that suggests prayer is primarily a matter of changing *us*. “The primary purpose of prayer, as illustrated throughout Scripture, is precisely to change the way things are” (p. 204). “In a warfare worldview things genuinely hang upon what free, morally responsible beings do or do not do.

What this view may lose by way of providing believers with security it gains by way of inspiring believers to take responsibility. In terms of building the kingdom, the main thing we do, as Jesus both teaches and demonstrates, is to exercise prayer and faith. When disciples do this, no demonic obstacle to the kingdom, however formidable, can stand in their way (Mt 21:21–22)” (p. 205). In this warfare worldview, Jesus’ nature miracles are part of his demonstration of his power (e.g. over the sea), pointing to and anticipating his ultimate victory over this fallen world.

Chap. 8: “Storming the Gates of Hell: Kingdom Conflict in the Teachings of Jesus” (pp. 215–237). Here Boyd extends his horizons to “the rest of Jesus’ teachings” (p. 215). To make the chapter manageable, he simply highlights “the warfare dimension of a selection of Jesus’ teaching” (p. 214), both in the Synoptics and in John. In particular, he treats “the gates of hell” passage (Matt 16:18–19), the Lord’s prayer, oaths from “the evil one,” sowing seeds and collecting weeds (various parables), violence and the kingdom, and an apocalyptic discourse (what most refer to as the eschatological discourse, Mark 13 and parallels). Though John reports no exorcism (he does say that Judas Iscariot was possessed), the sheer linguistic dualism of his gospel embraces the warfare worldview: light versus darkness, God versus the ruler of this world, “from God” and “from the devil,” and so forth. Regarding the man born blind (John 9, which account Boyd links with Zosia), what was “for the glory of God” was not the blindness itself, but the miraculous healing, taking the *hina* clause as imperatival (“Let the works of God be manifested!”) to avoid the more obvious implication.

Chap. 9: “Christus Victor: The Warfare Significance of Christ’s Death and Resurrection” (pp. 238–268). Here Boyd explores two themes: The NT understanding of Christ’s death and resurrection “as accomplishing a cosmic victory over God’s enemies” (p. 239), and a survey of how this outlook works out in various NT corpora in the way salvation is perceived as deliverance from bondage to the devil.

Chap. 10: “Engaging the Powers: The Christian Life as Spiritual Warfare” (pp. 269–293). In this concluding chapter, Boyd surveys the way various NT writers refer to Satan and demonic powers, and then provides “an overview of how they understand the ongoing activity of this realm in the world and against the church” (p. 270). The chapter ends with a brief treatment of the origin and ultimate destiny of these powers, and a brief defense of “the centrality of the warfare perspective” (pp. 290–293). Among the concluding lines, Boyd asserts the following:

It is, I think, undeniable that the warfare worldview on one level depicts a scarier world than the providential blueprint worldview, for the simple reason that opening one’s eyes to the reality of war is indeed scary. At the same time, this prospect strikes some of us as less scary than the prospect of living in an actual spiritual war but being ignorant of this fact. It certainly seems less scary than living in a cosmos that is being coercively run by a supreme being who secretly wills the torture of little girls—“for his glory.”

Yet even if we were to concede that the genuine contingency and real battles of the warfare worldview present a world that is scarier than the divine

blueprint worldview, it would not follow that this worldview is less hopeful than the blueprint model. Precisely the opposite is the case, I would argue. . . . The hope that the New Testament offers is not the hope that God has a higher, all-encompassing plan that secretly governs every event, including the evil intentions of malicious angelic and human beings, and that somehow renders these evil wills "good" at a higher level. To my way of thinking, at least, that supposition generates a truly hopeless position. For if God's will is already being done as Zosia's eye sockets are bleeding, what have we to look forward to? If justice is, on some secret transcendental plane, already being served, what do we have to look forward to? If God is already vindicated because "the big picture" justifies Zosia's torment "for the good of the whole," then we really have no reason to hope that things will fare better for Zosia or ourselves in the world to come.

In direct contrast to all this, the ultimate hope that the New Testament offers is eschatological. . . . Indeed, Paul has the inspired audacity to proclaim that, when the kingdom has finally fully come, the glory and joy that we shall know will render all the sufferings of this world insignificant. Whatever else this may mean, it means that God will somehow make it up to Zosia, and to her mother (pp. 292–293).

### III. EVALUATION

I imagine this book will prove influential. It fits in with a culture increasingly convinced that meaning is generated by human beings and their sub-cultures; it coheres with some of the main emphases of process theology. (Most "open God" theorists distinguish themselves from process thought primarily by their adherence to the doctrine of creation, but here Boyd's thought is more radical, even if tentative, and more problematic, as we shall see.) Moreover, the clarity of Boyd's writing means he provides us with a good read. In fairness to his position, a great deal of his exposition of the warfare theme is insightful, helpful, and interesting. Moreover, some Christians do tumble into a static fatalism that they mistake for active faith, and insofar as Boyd helps them escape from such a morass, I am grateful.

Nevertheless, I regretfully conclude that the strengths of this book are precisely the things that make it so dangerous. Its genuine attractions will make it more influential than it deserves to be. Boyd's stance is exegetically unconvincing, theologically troubling, historically selective, philosophically naive, and frequently methodologically unfair. These are strong statements, and I am loath to make them, not least in a review which, though too long, is far too short to provide an adequate rebuttal. But perhaps a few points will prove helpful.

(1) Boyd's entire book sets up an absolute antithesis that caricaturizes his opponents' positions. He advances a "warfare worldview"; over against this, his opponents espouse "classical-philosophical tradition," "Western theology," the "blueprint model of providence," the "providential blueprint worldview." In its essence, the opponents' position is fatalistic or deterministic under a sovereign God who has a blueprint. To repeat some lines from Boyd: "If one attempts to understand Zosia's nightmare against a canvas that

depicts the cosmos as meticulously controlled by an all-loving God, one must question either the genuineness of God's love or the genuineness of the evil. But if a person views such suffering against a canvas that depicts the world as a veritable battlefield, ravaged by eons of conflict among powerful invisible forces, such suffering begins in a perverse way to make sense, for this is what war looks like" (p. 73). Assuming for a moment, however, that Boyd wants to argue with his opponents at their best, then why this antithesis? Boyd focuses on those statements of his opponents that emphasize God's sovereignty, but those same opponents also speak of the rebellion of angels and of human beings, of their defiance of God, of sin as failing to do what God commands and doing what God forbids, of spiritual warfare, and so forth. He may not like their synthesis, he may think it is philosophically indefensible (I'll return to this point), but he has no right to caricature them by picking up one element of their understanding of what the Bible says about God and absolutizing it in such a way that they are made to hold positions that they do not in fact adopt.

Despite the trappings of scholarship, this book is not an evenhanded evaluation in the light of Scripture of complex issues. Boyd cannot say anything good of his opponents. I have quoted him so extensively above precisely to demonstrate that his fundamental antithesis is absolute: either one follows Boyd's "warfare worldview" or one follows those who ostensibly place God in the indefensible position of being morally responsible for Zosia's eyes, and thus morally flawed.

The absolute antithesis shows itself in two important ways, one at the level of his arguing with opponents, and the other at the level of exegesis. I begin with the former. Boyd cites such theologians as Augustine, Calvin and Sproul in order to make the "providential blueprint" worldview as ugly as possible (see again the closing paragraphs of his book). But although Calvin, say, frequently speaks in absolute terms of the sovereignty of God, that is not all he says on the subject of good and evil that is relevant to the debate. To take a couple of examples among hundreds, Calvin writes the following:

Moreover, though their perdition depends on the predestination of God, the cause and matter of it is (*sic*) in themselves. . . . Whence then the depravity of man, which made him revolt from God? Lest it should be supposed that it was from his creation, God expressly approved what proceeded from himself. Therefore, man's own wickedness corrupted the pure nature which he had received from God, and his ruin brought with it the destruction of all his posterity. . . . I think I have said enough, not only to remove the ground, but also the pretext of throwing blame on God. The reprobate would excuse their sins by alleging that they are unable to escape the necessity of sinning, especially because a necessity of this nature is laid upon them by the ordination of God. We deny they can thus be validly excused. . . . (*Institutes* III.xxii.8-9).

Or again, speaking of Satan in various Biblical texts:

This much, therefore, he has of himself, and his own iniquity, that he eagerly, and of set purpose, opposes God, aiming at those things which he deems most contrary to the will of God. But as God holds him bound and fettered by the

curb of his power, he executes those things only for which permission has been given him, and thus, however unwilling, obeys his Creator, being forced, whenever he is required, to do Him service (*Institutes* I.xiv.17).

It would be easy to cull similar statements from, say, Augustine. Boyd simply has not taken his opponents' positions at their strength or in their complexity. In the closing paragraphs of his book, Boyd contrasts the ostensible comfort offered by the secret providential divine blueprint of traditional theology with his own eschatological hope. What he fails to point out is that his opponents offer eschatological hope no less than he, but also insist that God retains his sovereignty all the way to the eschaton. Boyd constantly draws from one strand of what his opponents say without reporting on or listening to what else they say that might be relevant. In one four-page section he insists that any sort of synthesis between God's absolute sovereignty and a meaningful theodicy is impossible, but never does he argue the case (except occasionally by caricature). He never wrestles with the nature of will, let alone free will; he never enters into the complex literature of secondary causalities; he never works through, whether to approve or refute, the elements in compatibilist theory. Of course, he might argue that his is a Biblical study, and these sorts of considerations are external to the Bible and part of the plague of Western philosophy that has bedevilled the subject. But *all* discussions of these matters pick up or reflect philosophical considerations, including Boyd's. For instance, his implicit notion of freedom and of free will is peculiarly Western and late. The application of his antithesis to the theologians he wishes to confute has only one aim: To make them appear silly, so as to enhance Boyd's own view. Well-read theologians will not be taken in for a moment; for the rest, *caveat emptor*.

But more importantly, the Bible itself is being domesticated by Boyd's absolute antithesis: That is the second way in which his argument proves disappointing. He chooses passages and draws debatable inferences from them in such a way that other passages have to be radically re-interpreted. On some issues, of course, he is prepared to attempt a more balanced synthesis in order to advance his argument. For example, when he wishes to refute scholars who espouse the "demonic-in-Yahweh" theory, the first thing he does is list an impressive array of texts that affirm God is utterly good. Methodologically, why does he not refute his own theory by listing an impressive array of passages that affirm or illustrate God's exhaustive knowledge and his utter sovereignty? Of course, then he would have to wrestle with the difficulties that Christian thinkers have been wrestling with for two millennia. His antithesis, he thinks, has enabled him to cut the Gordian knot.

Inevitably, the issue is complex. Many readers of Scripture intuitively distinguish between two ways in which the Bible speaks about God. One way emphasizes God's absoluteness. Here God is variously represented as transcendent, non-reactive (i.e. he is not so much reacting to people or events as ordering them) and sovereign. He is the God who does whatever he wants (Ps 115:3). His understanding has no limit (Ps 147:5). We may throw dice, but which side comes up is from the Lord (Prov 16:33). Not a sparrow tumbles to the ground apart from (not only God's knowledge but also) God's will

(Matt 10:29–30). Indeed, God’s knowledge includes what philosophers call “middle knowledge”—not only what has been, is and will be, but what might have been under different circumstances (e.g. Matt 11:20–24). He is the God who is above the fray: “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind” (1 Sam 15:29). The standard theologies and concordances provide access to very long lists of such passages.

On the other hand, the other way the Bible talks of God emphasizes his personhood. What we know about persons involves interaction, assessment, questions and answers, reaction, relationships. So it is with God. He asks Adam where he is; he decides to test Abraham or Hezekiah; he longs for his image-bearers to intercede with him; he is sorry that he made the human race and all but wipes it out in the flood. The sorts of passages that Boyd has tapped into belong to this second category.

But sooner or later one must ask how these two ways of talking about God relate to each other. The historical variations include, but are not exhausted by, Pelagianism, Calvinism and Arminianism. Of course, one can push these two ways of talking about God to greater extremes. If one emphasizes only the former, and utterly domesticates and ignores the latter, one lapses into fatalism or (with a couple of twists) some form of Deism—in any case, non-Christian theism. If one emphasizes only the latter, and utterly domesticates and ignores the former, one lapses into some version of a finite or process God—in any case, non-Christian theism. Try as I do to read Boyd sympathetically, I cannot escape the conclusion that he treads dangerously close to this second extreme.

Worse, he paints the antithesis as if only the extremes are possible. Then, finding the first extreme objectionable (as it surely is), he opts for and defends the second. But there is a spectrum of positions between the two with which he never grapples, save to dismiss them by saying that Christian thinkers have never resolved the problem. True enough, they haven’t resolved it, if by resolution one means (a) that some position or other has convinced everyone or nearly everyone—but in that case Boyd’s position resolves nothing either; or (b) that none of the positions provides so exhaustive an answer that it eliminates further questions and removes all tensions. Judging it to be philosophically incoherent, Boyd rejects, for instance, the Calvinist synthesis. But others insist that synthesis is perfectly coherent and suffers only from want of information: we observe, they say, that the Bible presents God as both transcendentally sovereign and personal, but we do not know how a personal God inhabits eternity. Meanwhile, Boyd’s position also has (as we shall see) more than a few philosophical questions to answer. *Medice, cura te ipsum*. The absolute antithesis he espouses in order to eliminate the first pole and drive us toward his own solution is not demanded by the evidence. It is merely a rhetorical device that manipulates readers without evenhandedly informing them of the theoretical possibilities (let alone evenhandedly evaluating the exegetical plausibilities).

I have been arguing that Boyd “chooses passages and draws debatable inferences from them in such a way that other passages have to be radically

re-interpreted.” I must now probe the matter of “debatable inferences” as a component of this construction of absolute antitheses. For example, in his opening treatment of Daniel and his prayer, Boyd infers that God’s answer might have been delayed by more than three weeks if Michael had not intervened, and that the delay itself lies beyond God’s will and Daniel’s faith in the realm of the machinations of evil angels. But none of these inferences is necessary. They presuppose the conclusions Boyd wishes to draw. No one doubts the delay: That is what the text affirms. But is it necessary to infer that the machinations of the evil angels that were the immediate cause of the delay were entirely outside God’s control or will? Or that Michael’s intervention not only prevented further delay, but did so independently of God’s control or will? Again and again Boyd draws inferences that are valid only if his conclusions about God are valid to begin with. And his conclusions about God, I would argue, do not adequately account for what I have called the Bible’s first way of talking about God—viz., representing him as sovereign, transcendent, non-reactive—which in fact disallows his inferences. The absolute antithesis must be made to prevail, or Boyd’s position rapidly becomes unbelievable.

(2) Boyd repeatedly asserts that human responsibility in moral decisions turns on the kind of absolute freedom that makes God, at such points, absolutely contingent. In his hands, this discussion adopts the form of an absolute antithesis that is related to the first: either God is utterly sovereign and human beings are robots, or human beings (and other moral agents such as angels) are held to be morally responsible because of their utter freedom and God is necessarily contingent. I have already stated that he never defends this antithesis, despite the vast and complex literature on the matter that stands against him. But now I wish to point out that there are many, many passages of Scripture that stand against him as well. Here I mention only three.

(a) Gen 50:19–20. This passage Boyd treats briefly. He says that this is an instance of God *using* evil agents and their evil intentions. Strictly speaking, however, that is not what the text says. The text says that the selling of Joseph into slavery was an act that was the product of two quite different sets of intentions: “You intended to harm me,” Joseph tells of his brothers, “but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” The events are presented neither as a wonderful plan of God that the evil brothers almost destroyed by their monstrous wickedness, nor as an evil act that God turned around by his timely intervention. Rather, it was simultaneously the product of two quite different intentionalities, human and divine, vile and good respectively. This sounds much more like the compatibilism Boyd rejects than Boyd’s own position.

(b) In Isa 10:5–19 (a passage Boyd does not treat), God pronounces his “woe” on the Assyrians for their cruel attack on the people of God. On the one hand, they are nothing but the rod of his anger, the club of his wrath (10:5). God himself dispatches them to chastise the godless nation of Israel; God himself ordains them “to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets” (10:6). But that is not what the Assyrians

ians think. They think they are doing this all by themselves. God mocks their pretensions of strength and independence (10:7–11), and vows that when he has finished his “work” against Mount Zion and Jerusalem—i.e. his work of punishing his people by the hands of the Assyrians—he will “punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes” (10:12). Again God mocks Assyria’s pretensions (10:13–14), and then asks, “Does the ax raise itself above him who swings it, or the saw boast against him who uses it? As if a rod were to wield him who lifts it up, or a club brandish him who is not wood!” (10:15). Therefore the Lord will destroy Assyria (10:16–19). From this example, it should be clear that God holds Assyria responsible *even though God has been using Assyria all along the way a man uses a tool*. Here, too, is compatibilism. This sort of passage is a long way from the reductionistic antitheses Boyd espouses.

(c) Acts 4:27–28 is another text not treated by Boyd. Christians are praying together after the church faces its first whiff of persecution. They cite Psalm 2 (Acts 4:25–26), which describes kings and rulers standing together against the Lord and his Anointed One. Then they say: “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed.” In other words, what brought about Jesus’ death was a wicked political conspiracy, a willful human corruption, the travesty of justice sacrificed on the altar of expediency. The Christians then add: “They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (4:28). In the light of the lines quoted from Psalm 2, the Christians are not only saying that God remained so much in charge of Jesus’ death that the human protagonists acted in accord with his sovereign sway, but that the entire conspiracy that sent Jesus to the cross was the fulfillment of prophecy. It will not do to analyze what happened as an instance where wicked agents performed an evil deed, and then God intervened to turn it into good, for in that case the cross itself becomes an afterthought in the mind of God, a mere reactive tactic. All of Scripture is against the notion. The Biblical theology of sacrifice, the passover lamb, the specifications for *yom kippur*, the priestly/sacrificial system—all together anticipate and predict, according to NT authors, the ultimate sacrifice, the sacrifice of the ultimate lamb of God. But neither will it do to reduce the guilt of the conspirators because God remained in charge. If there is no guilt attaching to those who were immediately responsible for sending Jesus to the cross, why should one think that there is guilt attaching to *any* action performed under the sovereignty of God? And in that case, of course, we do not need any atonement for guilt: The cross is superfluous and useless.

The reality is that compatibilism is simply presupposed. In the one event, human beings are guilty, and God is sovereign. By contrast, push Boyd’s disjunctions hard enough, and it is impossible to make sense of the cross.

This is not to deny that sometimes the Bible *does* paint a picture of God coming to the rescue after an evil agent has fomented a wicked plan. The diversity of emphases, of the ways the Bible has of talking about God and his interactions with moral agents (whether human or angelic), is extraordinarily rich, and we need all of them to remain faithful to what the Bible says

about God. But certainly one must not overlook the scores and scores of passages where compatibilism is simply assumed. There are theological costs to be paid when the Biblical evidence is forced to lie on a procrustean bed of absolute antitheses.

(3) One of the elements somewhat hidden in Boyd's discussion is the question of what God knows. There are brief hints at what Boyd thinks. If God knows that if he does nothing "X" will happen, and decides not to do anything, then in some way or other God stands behind the "X" event when it happens. Thus questions of God's sovereignty are tied to questions of God's knowledge. To preserve God from any charge of moral failure (granted Boyd's antitheses and denial of compatibilism), Boyd is prepared to defend God by identifying things that God does *not* know.

This is not worked out as rigorously as in the book written by Clark Pinnock *et al.*, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (InterVarsity, 1994), but as far as I can see it adopts the same sort of stance. Better put, it seems to want to ground Biblically what *The Openness of God* attempts to ground theologically: God either cannot know or chooses not to know (there is some difference in emphasis from contributor to contributor) the result of a future, free, contingent decision made by a moral agent.

The issues are complex. Here I can venture only a few comments.

(a) By way of introductory remark, I doubt that it helps to distinguish between what God does not know and what God chooses not to know (a distinction not made by Boyd: He does not directly address this question, though surely some thoughtful readers sooner or later are bound to raise it). God's ignorance becomes, for Boyd, part of the defense of God's morals. But if God were to *choose* to be ignorant, then surely at some level of his being he knows enough, or once knew enough, to know what he must not know if he is to protect his moral status. At that point his choosing not to know has the flavor of the duplicitous.

(b) Those wishing to evaluate claims about God's ignorance by searching the Scriptures have two kinds of material to challenge them. The first are the generalizing statements about God's limitless knowledge or ordaining predictions: I have already referred to a few such passages, and of course there are many more (e.g. Ps 139:16). The second are the many instances where God or Jesus specifically predicts or ordains something which from the human perspective turns on one or more future, free, contingent human decisions—sometimes only a little way ahead (e.g. Gen 40:8; John 6:64; predictions of the fall of Jerusalem in Jeremiah and Ezekiel), and sometimes a long way ahead (e.g. Isa 45:13; Mic 5:2; Acts 2:23). In both kinds of Scriptural text it is difficult to square what the Bible actually says with the theory that God cannot know the substance of future, free, contingent decision.

(c) It has been argued that the questions God asks in order to elicit information, if taken at face value, show that God is less than omniscient. How much this is the stuff of accommodation (see below) must be sorted out. But at very least one should recognize that at least some of God's questions in Scripture, though formally they elicit information, cannot possibly be under-

stood to be, in fact, eliciting information—i.e. information that God does not already know. For example, when God calls out to Adam, “Where are you?” (Gen 9:8), no future, free, contingent decision is at stake. No one, so far as I know, argues that God does not really know where Adam is. But if in this case the question is part of God’s personal interaction with his image-bearers and not an eliciting of information, why must we insist that other questions God asks reflect his relative ignorance? At very least such matters must be weighed in the light of the many Scriptures that affirm the sweep of God’s knowledge.

(d) If it be argued that God knows the results of *some* future, free, contingent decisions, the question becomes, How is it that he knows some and not others? If he *chooses* not to know some such results, we are back with (a). If the selection is made on the basis of something else that leaves him genuinely ignorant, what is that something? But if he knows some results of future, free, contingent decisions, what is to stop him from knowing the results of all of them—which is in line with the generalized claims of Scripture?

(e) Boyd’s analysis presupposes that God is somehow locked in time, along with his finite creatures. If God is transcendent—i.e. “above” or “beyond” or “outside” the universe that he has created, including the structures of time and space, it is much harder to think of some definitive reason why such a God could not know the results of decisions taken by creatures locked *in* time and space, where their decisions, by their own reckoning, are future, free, and contingent. What this does mean, of course, is that we know almost nothing about how God does this: There are simply too many unknowns about timelessness, not to say about the ways God knows, the nature of secondary causalities, and a host of related subjects. But God’s transcendence surely squares with the Biblical evidence much better than do the theories of his finiteness. If this is correct, one wonders if Boyd’s strategy of placing God *within* time is part of his commitment, once again, to build an entire doctrine of God out of what I have called the reactive, personal ways in which the Bible speaks of God, while ignoring or domesticating the transcendent, non-reactive emphases.

(f) It may help to clarify the nature of this debate if we contrast it with the traditional debate between Arminians and Calvinists. Arminians and Calvinists hold in common that God is omniscient, and that this omniscience includes foreknowledge. For both parties, God knows the future. Where they divide is over the nature and extent of God’s sovereignty in nexus with this knowledge. But the advocates of the openness-of-God stance, including Boyd so far as I can see, are saying in effect that what is future to us is future to God, and where that future involves a free, contingent decision, God cannot know that future.

All sides agree that sometimes the Bible depicts God with reference to the future. Most Christians across the centuries have seen this as part and parcel of his accommodation in revelation to human beings: In interaction with them, person to person, he depicts himself in the categories that we most readily grasp, the categories that belong to the dimensions of our finiteness (just as he discloses himself in human language—no less an act of

accommodation). But to infer instead that such language means God is locked in time—quite apart from the philosophical and theological difficulties with such a notion—surely commits one to inferring that God has physical ears, physical arms, a physical nose, and so forth. For no one doubts that the Bible not infrequently depicts God in the frame of reference of finite human beings, using metaphorical and analogical language to provide us with rich anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms. The reason why Christians have heretofore concluded that such language *is* metaphorical or analogical is because the Bible has so many other passages that describe God in non-reactive, transcendent ways. Of course, Boyd and others are at liberty to elevate the reactive language above the non-reactive language, but then consistency surely favors that they also conclude that God has physical arms. Methodologically, such an approach to the doctrine of God has some parallels with Mormon thought.

(g) One must face the practical implications of a God who does not know the results of future, free, contingent decisions. He cannot know who is alive a century from now. How could he possibly know in the sixth century before Christ that six hundred years later the superpower in the Mediterranean basin would be Rome? Were the decisions of Jesus to obey his Father and go to the cross free, future, contingent decisions? If so, then on Boyd's reading God could not have known the outcome and was taking a bit of a chance: The bit about the Lamb slain from before the foundation of the world is a little hard to swallow. But if not, then on Boyd's reading Jesus was a puppet and his sacrifice scarcely the result of moral choice. In short, the more one pushes this reconstruction the more problematic it becomes. What first appears as a neat solution to the problem of evil eventually makes one appreciate the centuries of Christian thinkers whom Boyd dismisses, but who surely grasped the complexities better than Boyd himself.

(4) Here is the place to reflect a little further on Boyd's approach to the problem of evil. Of course, in part we must await his next book. But on the basis of what he has already written, perhaps we may venture a few observations.

(a) Boyd repeatedly says that one of the proofs that traditional debates about theodicy must be fundamentally flawed is the fact that the Bible never or at best rarely recognizes that there is a problem. But this, surely, is mistaken. It is hard to sustain that conclusion after a thoughtful reading of, say, Job, Psalm 73, and Habakkuk. In the NT, part of the anguish of the book of Revelation is bound up with the consternation of the martyrs already under the throne: How long will it be until their blood is avenged? Precisely when evil seems so strong and opposition to the people of God so ominous and threatening, John refuses to back off and conclude that since we are in a warfare situation, and God is doing the best he can, we must simply accept the suffering. Far from it. We are indeed in a warfare situation, but the Lord God Omnipotent reigns, and this eschatological note of certain triumph is irrefragably tied to this truth. Moreover, I suspect that one of the reasons why there are not more Biblical writers who cast the problem of evil in the kinds of categories that would please a Hume is because they were not only

believers, but they were compatibilists. Western tradition has had most intellectual difficulty with evil when it has distanced itself from Biblical compatibilism. The *experiential* difficulty, of course, is not restricted to people raising certain intellectual problems—which is precisely why the problem of evil does indeed repeatedly surface in the pages of Scripture.

(b) We must reflect a little more on Job's anguish. Boyd is right to point out that his is a case of innocent suffering: The narrator says so, and God himself says so, in chap. 1. Boyd is also right to see the warfare dimension in what follows: The defiance and challenge of Satan are what sets this drama in motion. So far, so good. But thereafter Boyd misses some of the main points of the book. Even from the beginning, Satan can only do what God sanctions; he has to secure permission to do Job any harm. In other words, God retains his absolute control. As in Gen 3:1, where the fact that the serpent was made by God and is thus a dependent creature and not an utterly independent force informs the story, so also here: The warfare worldview is real, yet it remains under the outermost limits of God's sovereign control. *That is why there is mystery in evil; that is why Job finds himself in anguish.*

If he had accepted Boyd's worldview, it is difficult to see why Job should be agonizing as he does. He should be saying, "This is extraordinarily painful and disturbing, but after all, I must not be surprised. I am in a war. In war, the innocent suffer. God has doubtless done the best he can. Life isn't fair, I know that." His anguish would be personal and psychological, but it would not charge God with anything. In short, he would take the stance of Rabbi Harold Kushner, in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. But what in fact do we find in the book of Job? The debate between Job and his three "miserable comforters" is most instructive. With variations, the "comforters" argue that if Job is suffering, it must be because God is punishing him, and God would punish him only if Job were evil. So Job's sufferings prove he is evil, and what he must do is repent and throw himself upon the mercy of God. Job does not deny that he is sinful in some sense, but he insists that he has done nothing to deserve the dreadful sufferings he is enduring. But the important thing about Job's stance, for our purposes, is that he does not simply ascribe his sufferings to the demonic realm of a "warfare worldview." Job knows perfectly well that God himself must stand behind them in *some* sense. One part of him passionately believes that God is good and sovereign; the other part of him passionately believes that he, Job, has done nothing worthy of such suffering. So his language of protest flirts with the notion that God is being unfair, even if in other passages he avows in the strongest language that God is good. This is the tension that causes Job his anguish (see, for instance, Job 16; 17; 19:6; etc.).

Moreover, when God finally replies to Job out of the whirlwind, he does not protest that he has done the best he can, and what Job really needs is to toughen up a little to face the suffering that happens in a warfare worldview. The burden of these chapters (Job 38–41) is that God is so elevated beyond all of Job's capacity to understand, that Job would be wise to curb his tongue and withdraw his accusations. None of this provides any substantive

answer to Job's questions. Indeed, the drama ends without Job receiving the kinds of answers he hoped for and was demanding. He is left with mystery, *and is content with it*, because he has now glimpsed a little more of the grandeur of God. Job's response to God's extended speech is not, "Now I understand," but "I repent" (42:1–6). Indeed, God responds by saying that, by contrast with the three "comforters" who have said many things that are untrue, Job has basically got it right (42:7): God is good, God is sovereign and there is mystery in the problem of evil.

There are many other Biblical components to this subject, of course. One of the themes of Psalm 73 is that when the evil flourish and seem removed from any threat of judgment, it is important to take the long view: Ultimate justice will be done. In NT terms, the final demonstration of justice, both done and seen to be done, comes in the eschaton: That is part of the message of Revelation. Many other elements could be adduced. Compared with such a complex and nuanced stance, Boyd's theodicy strikes the reader as terribly reductionistic.

(5) Something similar occurs in Boyd's treatment of prayer. We have seen that Boyd insists that "the primary purpose of prayer, as illustrated throughout Scripture, is precisely to change the way things are" (p. 204). It is not to bring ourselves into line with what God wants. Thus all kinds of things are contingent in our praying.

I am not sure that either formulation—that by prayer I change things, or that by prayer I am changed—is entirely helpful if it is absolutized. Surely no one would want to deny that some of our praying *ought* to be that we ourselves would be changed: "Not my will, but yours be done." On the other hand, many prayers in the Bible are cast as the means by which something or other is effected. James warns believers that they "have not" because they "ask not." By contrast, Moses intercedes for the sinning Israelites, and God spares them (Exodus 32–33). Yet as God makes clear elsewhere, leaders are *supposed* to intercede on behalf of the people, and thus "build up the wall" of protection for them—i.e. *it is in accordance with God's will so to pray*. One interesting example is Daniel's intercession for the end of the exile, *precisely because he knows that according to God's own word the time for the end of the exile has arrived* (Dan 9:2). Daniel prays for what God has promised. These sorts of passages warn us against reductionistic analyses. Why cannot ardent intercessory prayer that at the phenomenological level accomplishes something be itself as much the product of God's grace as the means of accomplishment? Would not that sort of analysis stand a great deal closer to the complex Biblical depictions of God and his sovereignty than the reductionistic analysis that thinks of prayer as utterly independent of God?

The connections between prayer and divine sovereignty are complex. Not for a moment do I pretend that any of this is easy. But I wonder if Boyd has reflected at length on the implications of his analysis of the subject. If certain things cannot get accomplished until we pray (understanding such prayer to be utterly independent of God), and then God acts in response to

our prayer, inciting God to do something that otherwise he had no intention of doing, do we not thereby introduce another range of problems of theodicy?

(6) At many points I wonder if the exegesis is quite right. True, demonized people are regularly viewed by Jesus with compassion. But is it right to make the victims/perpetrators disjunction quite so absolute? After all, elsewhere Jesus can condemn the city, and weep over it. I remain unpersuaded by Boyd's exegesis of John 9. And even though he introduces the gap theory with commendable hesitation, I see far more difficulties than advantages in his suggestion. Quite apart from hesitations about whether the grammar of Gen 1:1–2 readily supports a gap, the suggestion that God has to wrestle with the powers to get the whole creation going, and then, after a long gap, creates the perfectly "good" universe as we know it, raises numerous questions. Where did the malevolent powers come from in the first place? If they are God's creations, then none of the problems regarding the origin of evil are reduced, but merely projected farther back. If they were not created, then we have retreated to ontological dualism.

But enough. That I have written so long a review is evidence that I take Boyd's work seriously. Yet this has been a painful exercise. Boyd is clearly a sincere and competent man. I dislike being so negative about another's work. Yet I fear his book will lead some people to adopt a vision of God so far removed from both Scripture and from the central heritage of Christian confessionalism that I have little choice but to oppose it.

Angels, demons, spiritual warfare – they all exist, but we don't have to live in fear of the supernatural. God has given us a powerful weapon against temptation and accusation. He has given us His Word, the Bible, to remind us who He is, who we are, and what is true. The Holy Spirit brings God's promises to mind when we need them most. We can have victory over Satan's schemes by filling our minds with the truth of the Bible. Here are 10 verses to remember as you face the battles ahead. Ephesians 6:10-11.