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**“Decision Making in Yahweh’s Heavenly Council:
A Contribution to the Open Theism Debate”**

Introduction

I want to begin this paper by telegraphing my specific content points and how I’ll be presenting my argument. I’m obviously not claiming that what I say here will end the debates on sovereignty, free will, foreknowledge, predestination, and openness. I will say, though, that certain items have been neglected in the discussion that may provide some direction and insight. I believe that by contextualizing some important Old Testament data points against the backdrop of the wider ancient Near Eastern worldview—a worldview shared to a great extent by the biblical writers—some things may come into focus in new ways. In other words, I hope to show you that contextualized OT exegesis has value for biblical theology.

1. I’m going to start with a discussion of the plurals in Genesis 1:26, where humankind is created. I’ll be contextualizing that verse with the wider scope of divine plurality in the HB and the ancient Near East. My position is that the plurals reflect Yahweh announcing to the members of the heavenly host, his divine council, of his intention to create humanity.
2. I’ll argue subsequently that the image is best understood as a status granted to humans, as opposed to a set of qualities or some ability. My basis for this will be Hebrew syntax and how the OT democratizes the ANE idea that certain humans (rulers) are offspring-representatives of the gods. Think of the image as a verb; that human beings are God’s imagers, and you get the idea. Humans were intended to represent God on earth, to be steward-kings of the planet; to be God as though he were physically here. Toward fulfilling our status as divine imagers, humans are given (in part, unevenly) a set of attributes useful for imaging God.
3. The plurals in Genesis 1:26 require the conclusion that the members of the heavenly host are also imagers of God, and so earthly imagers and heavenly imagers share something.
4. That something, I will argue, are certain communicable attributes of the Creator, namely freedom and sentient volition.
5. I’ll then suggest that any theological explanation of freedom or free will must explain how the absence of true freedom is a reflection of God. Without genuine freedom, it cannot be said of either a human being or a heavenly being that they image God. A non-free being is *not* like his or her free Creator; a being that has free will *does*. This freedom is not to be equated, however, with autonomy.
6. The Hebrew Bible tells us that the members of Yahweh’s council participate in decision-making. In some cases Yahweh determines a specific end and allows his free will beings to choose how they’ll get the job done. In other cases, the

decisions of the council and the decision of Yahweh are fused more tightly. There is no indication that the council can undo Yahweh's will.

7. Finally, the language of decision-making used by the OT writers to describe the interactions of Yahweh and his council show that though the ends of Yahweh's will are determined, the means may be open. This is in concert with OT passages like 1 Samuel 23, which sever the link between Yahweh's foreknowledge and predestination. Yahweh can act unilaterally if he wishes, predestinating the ends and the means, but he doesn't have to. There is room for free will beings who image him to make decisions, moving the program of their Creator along in such a way that Yahweh approves, or that requires either His use of other free beings to move the program along, or a sovereign course correction of His own.

1. Plurality in Genesis 1:26

Let's back up now and look at Genesis 1:26-27:

26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind as our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." 27 So God created man as his own image, as the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."

26 וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ וַיְרַדּוּ
בְדִגְתַּי הַיָּם וּבְעוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבַבְּהֵמָה וּבְכָל־הָאָרֶץ
וּבְכָל־הָרֶמֶשׂ הַרֹמֵשׂ עַל־הָאָרֶץ:
27 וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא
אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה בָּרָא אֹתָם:

The most recent and thorough scholarly treatment of Genesis 1:26 was published by Brill in 2003 under the title *In His Own Image and Likeness: Humanity, Divinity, and Monotheism*, by noted Hebrew grammarian Randall Garr. Garr spends the first 84 pages of his book analyzing in technical detail the grammatical, syntactical, and literary features of the two other passages in Genesis (Gen 3:22; 11:5-7) where God seems to identify

himself as “we” before he even gets to Genesis 1:26. I’ll give you the salient points here and you can read Garr’s lengthy analysis if you’re so predisposed.

Garr entertains a number of suggestions for how to understand the plural language in these passages. He concludes that it is “interpretive sleight of hand” to argue that Genesis 1:26 should be understood as either the plural of solidarity (fullness), the plural of self-deliberation, or the plural of self-exhortation. He also addresses the plural of majesty argument, pointing out, as other Hebrew grammarians before him, that the plural of majesty is a phenomenon associated only with nouns. Applying this idea to the grammar of Genesis 1:26 has no biblical or ancient Near Eastern precedent. To quote Garr, “Apart from nouns, though, there are no certain attestations of the majestic plural in pronouns. The royal ‘we’ was not part of the vocabulary of kings or individual gods in the ancient Near East.”¹ Garr concludes, then, with many other scholars, that we have a true plurality here. God is announcing his intention to create humankind to his heavenly host, the divine council.

I would add that there is no grammatical or syntactical basis for limiting the plurality to three. Though seeing a reference to the Trinity here is fashionable with theologians, it can’t be argued from the text. That interpretation also leads to theological trouble elsewhere, where divine plurality interpreted as evidence for trinitarianism leads to heretical conclusions (Psalm 82). I would also add (and Garr agrees) that seeing Genesis 1:26 as a “plural of exhortation”—where *one* entity, in this case God, is announcing something to a *group*, in this case, the divine council, in no way means that humankind was created by more than one being or by lesser *elohim*. All the verbs for the act of creation here and elsewhere when the creation of humanity is in view, are singular.

2. Image or Imager?

I’m sure everyone in the room has put some thought into what is meant by the image of God. I’m also sure that if you’ve done any reading on the subject you’ve seen the image described as intelligence, rationality, emotions, the ability to commune with God, self-awareness, language capability, the presence of a soul, a conscience, or free will. While all those things are important, none of them is the image. The reasons are straightforward:

1. According to Scripture, the image of God is unique to humanity with respect to the rest of the Genesis creation (i.e., plants and animals). If any of the list of proposed identifications of the image are shared by animal life, that thing cannot be the image. That eliminates a number of the proposals already.
2. There is something about the image that makes mankind “like” God in some way.
3. There is nothing in the text to suggest that the image has been or can be bestowed incrementally or partially. One cannot speak of being “partly” created in God’s image or “potentially” bearing the image. Any item on the above list that is not equally shared by all humans or that is not present at some point in human development cannot be the image. To argue that way would require that human personhood be divorced from the image, since there would be points in human

¹ Garr, 19-20.

development where the *conceptus* is not in full possession of the image. The easiest illustrations are those items in the list connected to brain function. If the brain or its associated capacities are the image, then there is a time when the human *conceptus* does not have the image. I don't need to tell you that the dominant evangelical ethics paradigm would be upset if this was the case. It is ethically unhelpful, not to mention misguided, to argue that the contents of the womb are potentially human, but this is where the traditional views of the image actually leave us if they are closely scrutinized. Connecting the image to any ability at all is ethically very risky. It's also unnecessary.

So how do we meet the criteria for the image? How can we define it so that it retains human uniqueness among all earthly created things, is possessed in full from the moment of conception, makes us in some way like God—and, adding the plurals of Genesis 1:26, is also shared with heavenly beings?

My view of what the image means isn't new. Its focus is on a specific syntactic-semantic use of the preposition *beth*, which is prefixed to *tselem*, the word for "image," in the Hebrew text. In English, we use the preposition "in" to denote many different ideas. For example, if I say, "put the dishes *in* the sink," I am using the preposition to denote *location*. If I say, "I broke the mirror *in* pieces," I am using "in" to denote the *result* of some action or accident. If I say, "I work *in* education," I am using the preposition to denote that I was *as* a teacher or principal, or some other administrative role.

This last example is the key to understanding the image in Gen 1:26. Specifically, the syntactical function of the preposition *beth* called the *beth* of essence (*beth essentiae*) or *beth of predication*. The result is that the text conveys the idea that we are created as the image of God; to function in the capacity of God under his authority.

3. "Our image"—the image and the divine beings of the council

This understanding of the image concept would have us understand Gen 1:26 in two ways:

We are created *as* the image of God. In other words, humans were created to function *in the capacity of* God's representatives. The image is therefore not a thing put in us; it is a function or status. We are created to be extensions of His rule on and over earth. We administer his creation. This is evident since Genesis 1:27, the so-called dominion mandate, follows verse 26. If you are human, you are an imager of God, regardless of your abilities, and regardless of whether you are in full possession of those abilities. The Fall, of course, diminished the ability of all humans to image God, but we know from Genesis 9:6 and other passages that the human status of imager was not eliminated or undone.

We are created as imagers of the council itself. We do what it does, albeit on earth. They carry out God's will in the invisible spiritual realm; we do so in the realm given to us.

The tandem of “our” image and “his” image speaks to His bestowal of a status TO us and the way our administration mimics the heavenly council’s. Just as God rules the unseen world through created, contingent spiritual beings, so he rules his earthly created world through created, contingent, earthly beings.

4. Freedom as a communicable attribute for imaging God

In Genesis 3:22 we read

22 Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever.
<p>וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים הֵן הָאָדָם הָיָה כְּאַחַד מִמֶּנּוּ לְדַעַת טוֹב וְרַע וְעַתָּה פֶּן־יִשְׁלַח יָדוֹ וְלָקַח גַּם מִעֵץ הַחַיִּים וְאָכַל וַחַי לְעֹלָם:</p>
3:5 - For God (אלהים) knows (יָדַע) that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like divine beings (אלהים), knowing (יָדַעוּ) good and evil.”

Some observations are in order.

First, this verse sets the context for accurately understanding the preceding Genesis 3:5. Note that the text clearly alternates singular and plural participles of the same lemma to point to a singular *elohim* and plural *elohim*. Had the writer wished to put forth the notion of plurality *within* the singular God in this text, a plural participle in both locations would have been an obvious means to do so. We know that the second instance of *elohim* in Genesis 3:5 is plural because of 3:22 (“one of us”). The second, not the first, *elohim* in 3:5 is the textually-telegraphed antecedent of the plurality of 3:22. The “one of us” phrase in 3:22 is not a reference to plurality *within*; rather, God the speaker includes Himself with the council. They can have no attribute that He does not possess.

Second, in addition to the loss of their contingent immortality, the forbidden tree, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, did in fact bring humankind the knowledge of good and evil. God had earlier (2:17) told Adam that eating of the tree would bring death. The *nachash* adds the detail in 3:5 that eating of the tree would bring them the knowledge of good and evil, making them like the divine ones who served God. The transgression reaped both results. Humans no longer had access to immortality, being cut off from the tree of life and perpetual presence of God, and they had now become like the *elohim*, knowing good and evil.

But how are we to understand the catalyst to the change in humankind? What was it about humanity that, prior to the Fall, meant that humankind was somehow *unlike* the members of the heavenly host, but yet after the fall changed that condition?

The property in question cannot be the image itself, since that was present at humanity's creation. Humans were already like God and the divine council members in some way. But Genesis 3:5 and 3:22 describe some aspect of divinity from which humans were exempted. There was something lacking—due to the will of God, as seen by His command and his response to the disobedience. Whatever that was needs to be shared by God and his council *elohim*, though there is no indication that it must be equally shared between them.

I would suggest that the catalyst of this momentous change was Adam's decision itself. What he and Eve lacked was authority. Humans imaged God, but there was still hierarchical authority. Adam's decision moved him up in the hierarchy to the status of those who issue decrees *for* humanity, the status of those who “know good and evil”

(טוֹב וְרָע) who send forth blessing or calamity. We'll see examples of that in a moment in places like Daniel. What we have, then, is a transgression of a divinely imposed boundary, a violation of divinely prescribed order.

Not coincidentally, this situation parallels the other place in Genesis where we have the same sort of plural language. In Genesis 11:7, after observing what's going on at Babel, Yahweh addresses the council: “This is only the beginning of what they will do. Now, therefore, nothing which they decide to do will be out of their reach. Come (הַבֵּה), let us go down (נִרְדָּה) and there let us confuse (נְבַלָה) their language.”

Patrick Miller notes in this regard, “As in Genesis 3:22, the building of the tower at Babel is a sin against God as an effort to move into the divine world, the divine domain.” In both instances, the judgment is similar. In Genesis 3 humanity is dispersed from Eden; in Genesis 11, humanity is dispersed from Babel. Also in both instances, human imagers failed to serve a higher power, instead acting independently of that power.

Both the Fall and Babel tells us clearly that humans had the freedom to act independently. It was precisely this ability, used selfishly, that caused domain transgression. And it is at this point that certain views of sovereignty and predestination are shown to be untenable. If God had ordained that humans at Babel would do what they did, why the urgency to intervene? Was God under duress to stop what he ordained? Why worry that nothing would be out of the reach of humans? If he ordained that, what's the problem? Would God panic to correct something he ordained? If he didn't ordain it, what's the problem? It's not going to happen. But if the humans had freedom, now *that* requires a course correction.

This sort of freedom is also indicated with respect to the heavenly host elsewhere. Job 4:18 informs us that God does not trust his servants, the angels. Job 15:15 makes the

same point: “Behold, God puts no trust in his holy ones, and the heavens [heavenly ones – parallelism] are not pure in his sight.” As Clines notes, it’s saying too much to conclude that this mistrust harkens back to some pre-Fall rebellion never described in Scripture. It may allude to Genesis 6:1-4, but it really doesn’t matter. The end result is that even God’s heavenly imagers aren’t completely trustworthy. And again, absolute predestination of all events makes no sense here. Why wouldn’t God trust his heavenly imagers if he predestinated all that they do? Doesn’t God trust his own predestination? Why not just predestinate that they don’t do anything untrustworthy? After all, predestination cannot be overturned by the creature.

This brings us to a crucial question.

5. Can we image God—be like him as his representatives—without free will?

Free will is the ability to make a choice without being under coercion or duress to do so. This does not mean our decisions are made in total freedom, however. Total freedom involves making choices without *any* external influence at all, or having the power to filter out all external influences at will so as to make a truly independent, self-contained choice. Only God has such total freedom.

The story of Genesis is that God decided to share his freedom. We are what we are because we are created as imagers. Our freedom pales in comparison to our Maker’s, but this ability is part of what makes us like him. To deny that humanity has freedom as a communicable attribute is to simultaneously affirm that this is an attribute of God he refused to share with us. It’s also to leave us without a coherent answer as to how Adam’s decision, which resulted in transgressing a divine boundary that displeased God, could happen. If God predestinated it, why the concern? Why have the boundary? And, more telling, why have the punishment? The same goes for Babel. If it was predestinated, why the alarm?

The critical point is this: if we are imagers of God we *must* have genuine free will; we could not image him without true freedom. Why? Because imaging God means acting as God in his place, as though he were here. We could not be like God if we did not have genuine free will, and we could not image God if we were not like him. We are divine imagers, not divine pre-programmed bio-bots. Free will is essential to imaging God.

6. Participatory Decision-making in Yahweh’s council

The Hebrew Bible informs us that the members of Yahweh’s council participate in decision-making, exercising independence within parameters set by Yahweh. In these instances, Yahweh determines a specific end and allows his free will beings to choose how they’ll get the job done. In other cases, the decisions of the council and the decision of Yahweh are fused more tightly, so that Yahweh and the council are identified with each other. Neither category suggests the possibility that the council can undo Yahweh’s will.

6.1. Participatory Decision Making

1 Kings 22:19-23 is the classic text in this regard.

¹⁹ And Micaiah said,

“Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left;²⁰ and the LORD said, ‘Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?’ And one said one thing, and another said another.²¹ Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, saying, ‘I will entice him.’²² And the LORD said to him, ‘By what means?’ And he said, ‘I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And he said, ‘You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.’

²³ Now therefore behold, the LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these your prophets; the LORD has declared disaster for you.”

This passage informs us clearly that Yahweh has decided that Ahab’s time is up. He has purposed that Ahab will die, but allows deliberation on how his death is to be brought about. After some council discussion, one spirit steps forward with a proposal that Yahweh accepts, affirming that it will succeed. It should be noted that nothing in the passage compels the understanding that Yahweh learns anything here (i.e., that he didn’t know what suggestion would be brought forward). Nor does it support the idea that Yahweh predestinated the suggestion. The narrative only demonstrates that Yahweh allowed council members to choose how to carry out the decree.

This episode is in concert with other passages. In Job 1-2 we see the *śatan* in the same light. As many scholars have pointed out, *śatan* in this passage is not a proper name due to the presence of the definite article prefixed to the noun, and so is not the devil proper of the New Testament.² Lowell Handy points out that the *śatan*’s behavior here is actually consistent with that of various deities in council scenes in Ugaritic material, where a lesser deity reports to a higher deity.³ The *śatan* is the one deity responsible for checking on the misbehavior of humans. He is actually not talking back, but pointing out that the propensity of humans to behave well if they are not under duress. Yahweh decides to test the *śatan*’s estimation, knowing full well that Job will endure. For our purposes, here is the important observation: Yahweh allows the *śatan*—within boundaries—to decide by what means he will try to make Job curse God. Here again if this divine being lacks true freedom—that is, if his acts are predestinated by God—God is shown to be something of a twisted sovereign. Did

² I think there is a relationship, but not an identification.

³ Lowell K. Handy, “The Authorization of Divine Power and the Guilt of God in the Book of Job: Useful Ugaritic Parallels,” JSOT 60 (1993):107-118. Please note that I disagree with some of Handy’s characterizations of Yahweh.

God really predestinate the *saṭan's* report? The *saṭan's* specific and horrendous acts toward Job? It is one thing to trust God's permission of free will acts of the *saṭan* for the purpose of testing and subsequently healing and blessing Job and to show the *saṭan* incorrect. It is quite another to see God as staging the entire show to win a wager with a being who was acting the way he'd been programmed.

A final clear example of Yahweh's expectation that divine beings use their own free decision making capacity is the aftermath of the Babel incident. In Deut 4:19-20 and 32:8-9 Yahweh divided and assigned the nations to lesser *elohim* (and vice versa).⁴ The fact that Yahweh rejected the nations as His own people and took Israel as His portion (He called Abraham right after Babel) shows differentiation in rule on Yahweh's part. While Yahweh is ultimately sovereign, he does not unilaterally govern the other nations; he leaves that to subordinates, who are to rule in a manner consistent with His will. When they don't, they are judged. This is precisely the point of Psalm 82, where Yahweh judges the *elohim* of his council who are responsible for corrupt rule over the nations of the earth.

6.2. Close identification of Yahweh with the Divine Council

The two most apparent examples of mutual decision making in the council, albeit with close identification of Yahweh and the council, are found in the book of Daniel. In Daniel 4 we read of Nebuchadnezzar's second dream, the tree that reached to heaven and the king's subsequent madness. The announcement of Nebuchadnezzar's punishment is described in verse 17 this way: "The sentence is *by the decree of the watchers, the decision by the word of the holy ones*, to the end that the living may know that *the Most High rules* the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men." But seven verses later (v. 24) the sentence is described thusly: "this is the interpretation, O king: It is a decree of the Most High, which has come upon my lord the king." That is followed by the ambiguous plural of verse 26: "your kingdom shall be confirmed for you from the time that you know that Heaven rules / the heavenly ones rule (שֶׁלְטֹן שָׁמַיָא)."

⁴ Textual critics of the Hebrew Bible are unanimous in agreement that the Qumran reading (in brackets) is superior to the Masoretic text in Deut 32:8, which reads בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל ("sons of Israel"). See for example, P. W. Skehan, "A Fragment of the 'Song of Moses' (Deut 32) from Qumran," *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12-15; idem, "Qumran and the Present State of Old Testament Text Studies: The Masoretic Text," *JBL* 78 (1959) 21; Julie Duncan, "A Critical Edition of Deuteronomy Manuscripts from Qumran, Cave IV" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1989); 75-79; Michael S. Heiser, "Deuteronomy 32:8 and the Sons of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158:629 (January-March 2001): 52-74; Paul Sanders, *The Provenance of Deuteronomy 32* (Brill, 1996), 156; J. Tigay, *Deuteronomy, The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 514-518; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 269; Eugene Ulrich et al., eds., *Qumran Cave 4.IX: Deuteronomy to Kings* (DJD XIV; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

This identification of God with his council in issuing decrees is similar to material at Ugarit, where El is on several occasions virtually equated with the divine council.⁵ This is noteworthy in view of the opinion of the vast majority of Daniel scholars that chapter 7 of that book closely follows a divine scene in the Baal Cycle.⁶ Daniel 7 is our second example for a Yahweh-council identification.

Daniel 7 opens with the vision of the four beasts, which of course parallel the earlier vision in Daniel 2 of the statue of Nebuchadnezzar with its four metals or kingdoms. Daniel 7:9-12 describe a divine council meeting. Plural “thrones” are set up. There are more than two seats, since the Ancient of Days sits, whereas the Son of Man does not, and verse 10 tells us it is the “court” or council that is seated. The books of judgment are opened, resulting in the fourth beast being killed. The joint identification of the Ancient of Days and the Council (and the Son of Man to boot) is seen by virtue of three observations:

1. The judgment occurs after the council was in session. This is made explicit in verse 26 – “the court shall sit in judgment and his dominion shall be taken away.”
2. In Daniel 2 the fourth kingdom is destroyed by the kingdom of God.
3. The kingdom of God in Daniel 7 is given by God to the Son of Man, who shares it with the “holy ones” of the Most High in verse 25. These are likely not humans, since humans are brought into joint-kingship rule later in verse 27 (shall be given to the people of the holy ones of the Most High”). “Heavenly ones” is a term that refers to the divine council elsewhere (e.g., Psa 89:5-6; Job 15:15)

Regardless of how one interprets holy ones in Daniel 7, the decision to slay the fourth beast occurs at the behest of the Most High, but only after the council was put in session for the purpose of judgment.

7. Do Free Decisions of Divine and Human Imagers of God Overturn God's Predestination and Foreknowledge and Mean the Future is Open?

It may sound contradictory, but my answers to the above questions are, respectively, “no/no” and “yes.” I’ve argued that free will not only is evident with respect to divine and human beings under God, but it is part and parcel of imaging. There can be no imaging of God without freedom. Now we come to issue of predestination and foreknowledge. My position is formed on the basis of the Keilah incident in 1 Samuel 23.

⁵ In the classic work on the divine council, E. Theodore Mullen cites several Ugaritic texts where the divine council (*puḥru mōʿidu*) stands in parallel to *paʿanē ʿilu* or just *ʿilu* (E. Theodore Mullen, *The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* [HSM 24; Scholars Press, 1980], 129).

⁶ As John Collins in his *Hermeneia Daniel* commentary notes, “The vast majority of scholars focused on the book of Daniel now acknowledge that ‘[n]o other material now extant provides as good an explanation of the configuration of imagery in Daniel’s dream,’ and ‘[t]he background of this scene lies in ancient traditions about the council of El, where the gods sit on their ‘princely thrones’” (291, 301; citing Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic*, 98-99, and *KTU* 1.2.I:19-27).

¹ Now they told David, “Behold, the Philistines are fighting against Keilah and are robbing the threshing floors.” ² Therefore David inquired of the LORD, “Shall I go and attack these Philistines?” And the LORD said to David, “Go and attack the Philistines and save Keilah.” ³ But David’s men said to him, “Behold, we are afraid here in Judah; how much more then if we go to Keilah against the armies of the Philistines?” ⁴ Then David inquired of the LORD again. And the LORD answered him, “Arise, go down to Keilah, for I will give the Philistines into your hand.” ⁵ And David and his men went to Keilah and fought with the Philistines and brought away their livestock and struck them with a great blow. So David saved the inhabitants of Keilah. ⁶ When Abiathar the son of Ahimelech had fled to David to Keilah, he had come down with an ephod in his hand. ⁷ Now it was told Saul that David had come to Keilah. And Saul said, “God has given him into my hand, for he has shut himself in by entering a town that has gates and bars.” ⁸ And Saul summoned all the people to war, to go down to Keilah, to besiege David and his men. ⁹ David knew that Saul was plotting harm against him. And he said to Abiathar the priest, “Bring the ephod here.” ¹⁰ Then said David, “O LORD, the God of Israel, your servant has surely heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. ¹¹ **Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O LORD, the God of Israel, please tell your servant.**” **And the LORD said, “He will come down.”** ¹² Then David said, **“Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?”** And the LORD said, **“They will surrender you.”** ¹³ **Then David and his men, who were about six hundred, arose and departed from Keilah,** and they went wherever they could go. When Saul was told that David had escaped from Keilah, he gave up the expedition. ¹⁴ And David remained in the strongholds in the wilderness, in the hill country of the wilderness of Ziph. And Saul sought him every day, but God did not give him into his hand.

This passage has received surprisingly little attention.⁷ When it is discussed, the focus is typically that a future event that doesn’t happen is certain given conditions. I wouldn’t disagree, but I think that misses something more obvious. This passage clearly has God foreknowing an event that never happens. That means that foreknowledge does not necessitate predestination. In other words, the fact that God foreknows something does not require that the thing foreknown be predestinated.⁸

This connection is at the heart of any view that wants all events to be predestinated, but this passage severs that connection. In other words, it creates the possibility that, while God can foreknow all events real and possible, he doesn’t need to predestinate either. And in the context of what we’ve seen about the way God runs his affairs, at times ordaining an end but not the means, this distinction seems coherent. So in summary, with

⁷ There is surprisingly little attention paid to this episode. A search of the ATLA database for “Keilah” and “1 Samuel 23” respectively (any field) yielded ZERO hits (as of November 12, 2009). The passage is discussed in some systematic theologies, though not in detail.

⁸ I will leave it to the work of philosophical theologians to explain how we can wrap our minds around God’s ability to do this. With respect to this paper, I’m not interested in how I might understand it; I’m only interested in what is affirmed in the text.

respect to actual events, God may or may not have predestined them, but he foreknows them all—and even foreknows events that don't happen. And it is at this point that I am in disagreement with open theists who insist that God doesn't know human choices ahead of time. That seems incoherent in that, if God foreknows events that don't happen, why wouldn't he foreknow what the possible choices were and which choice would be made? How can God foreknow a list of options that will not happen, but be unable to know the thing that does? This makes little sense.

Conclusion

I hope that this paper has illustrated in some way how contextualizing familiar Old Testament discussions like the image of God against an ANE backdrop compels us to look at the text in different ways and ask different questions. Personally, I see great value in contextualizing the Bible for biblical theology rather than articulating our theology on the basis of much later historical circumstances (e.g., the Reformation). Thinking about imaging in the context of a divine council and the way God governs through that council helps us see that God has an over-arching plan for humanity with ordained ends, but the means may or may not be predestinated. He is sovereign and can steer the ship however and wherever he wants. But in a very real sense, what we do here on earth matters as we seek to image our Maker and King.