

PART TWO

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THE BIBLICAL CASE  
FOR DIVINE  
DETERMINISM

## CHAPTER FIVE

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# DOES THE BIBLE TEACH DIVINE DETERMINISM?

## **Why Ask the Question?**

I do not begin this exploration of whether the Bible teaches divine determinism out of idle curiosity. Personally, I grant absolute authority to the Scriptures. I assume, beyond question, that what the Bible teaches is true. Accordingly, studying the Bible is a vital part of my philosophical method. As I see it, to learn what the Bible teaches on a given subject is to learn the truth on that subject. Accordingly, if the Bible teaches divine determinism, divine determinism is true.

This chapter, therefore, explores whether the Bible teaches divine determinism under the assumption that the Bible has absolute, infallible authority over us. To present an argument in defense of biblical infallibility is outside the scope of this work. Therefore, I must ask the reader who is not already convinced of it to temporarily grant me my assumption regarding biblical infallibility for the sake of the arguments that follow in this chapter.

Anyone who has tried to settle a doctrinal debate by quoting a verse of the Bible knows that a belief in biblical infallibility does not settle the question of truth. It merely shifts the debate to another front. What the Bible teaches is indeed true, but there remains the question of how we are to understand what it actually teaches. What it “teaches” one person is rejected as contrary to the Bible’s teaching by another. To learn from the Bible requires that we interpret it, yet the Bible is prone to variant interpretations.

## **Orientation to This Chapter**

Variant interpretations of the Bible present a problem. How can we employ the Bible to discover the truth when everyone interprets it differently? Whose interpretation captures the infallible revelation encoded in it? In this chapter I shall briefly explore this problem and its solution in relation to the doctrine of divine determinism.

The first section will take a cursory glance at certain aspects of my theory of biblical interpretation. I begin the first section by exploring the role our prior assumptions play in the formation of all further beliefs. How we understand an experience and what we learn from that experience is shaped decisively by the beliefs we already hold as we enter into the experience—that is, by our pre-understanding. Bible study is no exception. Pre-understanding, in large part, determines how we will interpret a biblical text. The typical procedure we call “proof-texting” fails precisely because it ignores the crucial role of pre-understanding. But the powerful influence of our pre-understanding can nonetheless be overcome. In other words, the Bible can actually teach us truth rather than merely reflect our prior convictions.

The second section of this chapter concerns itself with the relevance of these theoretical observations to the specific issue of divine determinism. I apply my interpretive theory to the question of whether the Bible teaches divine determinism and outline the line of the reasoning by which I conclude that it does.

## **How Do We Know What the Bible Teaches? Theoretical Concerns**

### **THE PERSONAL FACTOR IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION: THE BIBLE AS A MIRROR OF OUR OWN BELIEFS**

When we seek to understand the Bible’s teaching, we must face squarely the personal factor in biblical interpretation. That the Bible “teaches” a person what he already believes is a very real phenomenon. More often than not, whatever beliefs I hold when I begin my study of a biblical text find “confirmation” in that text—whether they are actually upheld by that biblical text or not. In fact, due to the influence of previously held beliefs, the infallible Bible can “teach” me things that are not even true.

How can this be? Obviously, something is amiss. How are we to understand what happens in a situation where I understand the Bible to teach a particular doctrine and where that doctrine is false? It cannot be that the infallible Bible is actually teaching that doctrine. So how did I go so wrong?

It is not always and necessarily the case that my understanding of a biblical text reflects what its author actually intended. Its author did not

put that meaning in the text—I did. By shaping (even distorting) the meaning of the text to make it conform to what I already believe, I turn the text into a mirror of my own understanding rather than allow it to stand in judgment over me as the objective revelation of truth. Accordingly, I can quite readily believe that the false doctrines I embrace are actually “taught” by the Bible.

This phenomenon is not confined to irresponsible interpreters who exhibit a careless disregard for truth or a stubborn pride that refuses to acknowledge error. It also affects responsible interpreters who are sincerely seeking truth with integrity. This is not a controversial claim. I am saying nothing more than that misinterpretation is both a theoretical possibility and a concrete reality.

## THE WAY KNOWING WORKS

This should not surprise us. It is a straightforward result of the way God designed the learning process. We inevitably seek to make sense out of anything we encounter in terms of the way we already understand the world. Why not? I very reasonably assume that the way I currently understand the world is most likely the correct way to understand it. For, if it were not the correct way, why would I embrace it? It would be strange indeed to hold a view of reality that I am pretty confident is not the truth! Accordingly, by interpreting my experience in the light of my current view of reality, I assume that I am maximizing my chances for arriving at a correct understanding of current experience. To interpret my experience in the light of some other view of reality (one that I was less confident was true) would be absurd. Consequently, this is the process employed by every human being: experience-by-experience, we try to make sense out of the realities of life in terms of that view of reality we currently embrace as true.

The process of formulating our beliefs is conservative. That is, it tends to minimize the alterations that we make in our belief system. If at all possible, I understand my experience in such a way that my current view of reality is confirmed by my experience, not overturned. Experience will overturn my present worldview only if it confronts me with something that absolutely resists being explained in terms of my current worldview.

And so I proceed, indefinitely—until such time as my view of reality cannot make adequate sense of my latest experience. When that happens, I have a choice. I can exercise integrity, concluding that my worldview simply is not true, or I can be intellectually dishonest, stubbornly insisting on

the adequacy of my worldview anyway. If I opt for integrity, then I must change my worldview—adjusting it as needed to make sense out of this new inexplicable experience. Or, if necessary, I will discard it and adopt an entirely new worldview. But if I opt for intellectual dishonesty, I must somehow insulate myself from the incriminating fact of this inexplicable reality. I may dogmatically and arbitrarily insist that, contrary to appearances, it is consistent with my worldview after all—accepting an unsound or inadequate explanation for how that can be so. Or, I may simply refuse to think about it. Growth toward true understanding occurs only when the realities of life and experience show up the inadequacies of my current understanding and thereby force me to alter it.

For our purposes, the main point is this: all of us have a current working understanding of truth by which we seek to make sense out of life and experience. We always seek to interpret our experience such that our interpretation is coherent with and upholds this understanding. This is as it should be. It is the way God designed human reason to operate. Reason always starts with certain assumptions about what is true and proceeds from there. Without assumptions, inefficiency would paralyze our reasoning. If every time we sought to understand something, we were required to justify our most basic, foundational assumptions, growth in knowledge would be brought to a halt. Deduction of the simplest and most rudimentary belief would require so much time and energy that there would be nothing left to proceed any further. Practicality, therefore, dictates that reason must establish some assumptions and proceed from there, using them as the base upon which to construct further understanding. This is how understanding operates in every area of life. Understanding the Bible is no exception.

## **PRE-UNDERSTANDING IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION**

When we come to the Bible, we have a set of assumptions that we “know” to be true. While there is much we do not know, these things we know. We take them for granted; accept them as given. This set of assumptions that we accept as given prior to our confrontation with the biblical text is what some philosophers and theologians call our PRE-UNDERSTANDING. My pre-understanding is that understanding of reality (including, but not limited to, my theological understanding) in the light of which I try to make sense out of what I am reading in the biblical text.

Pre-understanding plays a prominent role in directing and shaping my

interpretation of a biblical text. So long as my pre-understanding seems to work—that is, so long as I can continue to construct plausible interpretations of the biblical text that are coherent with my pre-understanding—I will continue to allow it to guide my biblical interpretation. So long as my pre-understanding appears to be a reliable guide to reading the biblical text, I will continue to embrace the reading of the biblical text that it commends. Consequently, my pre-understanding strongly influences—even *controls*—the way I understand the Bible. The Bible, in turn, will always seem to support and promote a worldview that is congruent with my own. Since I interpret its text in the light of my pre-understanding, the Bible will inevitably confirm my pre-understanding, for my understanding of what the Bible is saying is deliberately constructed to be compatible with my pre-understanding in the first place.

## THE DIVINE DETERMINISM DEBATE AS AN EXAMPLE

Take divine determinism as an example. Suppose Dietrich Determinist and Freddie Freewiller are debating whether God is the cause of absolutely everything that happens.

Before he ever owned a Bible, Dietrich Determinist was convinced that God is the ultimate cause of everything that happens. Divine determinism is a part of his pre-understanding. But then so is his belief in the free will of man. He firmly believes in human freedom and moral accountability, but he believes that human freedom and accountability do not exclude the reality of divine control over human choice.

Freddie Freewiller, on the other hand, has three very different assumptions contained in his pre-understanding: (1) God is perfectly good and could never cause evil, (2) God cannot cause the choices of free moral agents if their choices are to be truly free, and (3) man has a free will. Everything he reads in the Bible is filtered through the grid of these three assumptions.

The debate begins with Dietrich focusing on Paul's description of God in Ephesians 1:11 as the one "who works all things after the counsel of His will." Dietrich understands this clause in the light of his determinist pre-understanding. Obviously, since it is true that literally everything that happens is caused by God, Paul must simply be referring to that fact in Ephesians 1:11. When Paul says all things, he means literally all things. All things happen by the will of God. From where Dietrich sits, this verse ought to end the debate.

Freddie, on the other hand, is looking at this clause in the light of a

very different set of assumptions. To him Paul obviously cannot be saying that literally everything happens by the will of God—for that would not be true. He already knows that evil and the choices of free-will agents are outside the scope of divine control. If Paul were saying that these happen by the will of God, he would be wrong. Obviously he cannot be saying that. Paul must be speaking figuratively (hyperbolically) when he says that God works “all things” after the counsel of his will. By the “one who works all things according to his will,” Paul is merely describing God as the one who, in his wisdom and might, is working to accomplish his overall goals in cosmic history. Paul surely does not mean that every particular of reality is subject to God’s will. Accordingly, this verse has posed no real problem to Freddie’s limited determinist perspective. It could only pose a problem if it were grossly misinterpreted along the lines of how Dietrich has interpreted it.

Now Freddie Freewiller tries to end the debate. He focuses on a constant thread throughout the Scriptures: God commanding man to live in accord with divine standards. “Love God.” “Trust God.” “Love your neighbor.” “Submit to one another.” “Do this.” “Do that.” Rightly so, Freddie looks at these commands in the light of his pre-understanding. Human choices are determined either by God (in which case man does not freely make them) or by man (in which case they are not subject to divine control). But this steady stream of commands obviously assumes that man determines the choices he makes. Otherwise, it would make no sense to appeal to him to be obedient. If he does not determine his own actions, why command him at all? So, Freddie reasons, if Scripture assumes that the individual man himself determines human choice, then it follows correspondingly that God does not. If anything can end the debate, this can. How can Dietrich ignore so prominent a feature of biblical revelation as the Bible’s moral commandments?

Dietrich Determinist, however, sees the commandments of Scripture in an entirely different light. Unlike Freddie, he does not understand human freedom and divine control to be mutually exclusive. For Dietrich, no less than for Freddie, human choices are determined by man himself. Man chooses freely and is accountable for the choices he makes. But, at the same time, man’s free choices are subject to divine control. Man will always freely choose in accordance with the divine will. What sounds like double-talk to Freddie makes perfectly good sense to Dietrich. It is a very vital part of his pre-understanding. Freddie’s evidence against divine determinism, therefore, is utterly unconvincing to Dietrich. Freddie’s evidence proves only that man makes freewill choices, a conclusion that Dietrich has never challenged. The point at issue is whether man’s free-



dom to choose rules out God's sovereign control. Freddie's appeal to biblical commandments does not prove to Dietrich that it does. Only in the light of Freddie's prior assumption that human freedom and divine control are mutually exclusive can the commandments even appear to be evidence. But in the light of Dietrich's assumptions, the commandments prove nothing. The debate goes on.

The thing to note in all of this is the powerful influence on biblical interpretation that is exerted by the pre-understanding. Neither Freddie nor Dietrich were being unreasonable or illogical. Both of them, given their respective starting points, reached intelligent and responsible conclusions regarding the meaning and implications of the biblical text. They came to opposite conclusions because they started from opposite assumptions. Each ultimately saw in the text what they had brought to the text to begin with. It acted like a mirror, reflecting their respective assumptions. It is not so much the case that the Bible has taught Dietrich and Freddie what to believe as it is that they (that is, their pre-understandings) have taught the Bible what to say back to them.

## WHY PROOF-TEXTING FAILS

The above example illustrates the futility of proof-texting. Typically, PROOF-TEXTING is the method used by Bible-believing Christians when they are trying to persuade another of their point of view. Proof-texting involves citing a particular verse or text that one is confident presents decisive evidence of the biblicality (and, hence, the truthfulness) of his point of view. This is the method Dietrich and Freddie were employing in the example above.

In their case, as in every similar case, proof-texting is virtually useless, for it has serious limitations. Namely, it proves a particular point of view only to those who already adhere to that view, only to those who already have that point of view as a part of their pre-understanding. To anyone who does not have that point of view as a part of their pre-understanding, the proof text will inevitably be unconvincing.

The interpretation one gives to any given proof text is so decisively shaped by his own pre-understanding that two people with significantly different pre-understandings must inevitably reach a different understanding of the meaning of the proof text. It would be virtually impossible for them to reach the same understanding of the proof text. Accordingly, what the proof text "proves" to the one who is using it as evidence it does not "prove" to his theological opponent, for his theological opponent



gives it a radically different interpretation.

So, the divine determinist's proof texts are only convincing proofs to other divine determinists, and the limited determinist's proof texts only convince other limited determinists. The tongues-speaking charismatic's proof texts are valid only to other charismatics. The adherent of believers' baptism cites texts that convince fellow-adherents of believers' baptism, but they are not the least bit convincing to the adherent of infant baptism. This reality renders proof-texting of very limited value. It is virtually useless in a debate across differing pre-understandings.

## THE VICIOUS CIRCLE

Does this important role played by our pre-understanding mean that we are prisoners of our current point of view? If the only way the Bible can teach us is through the mediation of our pre-understanding, then how could the Bible ever correct any false pre-understanding we might have? Biblical revelation cannot circumvent our pre-understanding and speak to us directly. So, it could appear that our original pre-understanding must be the permanent paradigm within which all our subsequent beliefs must fit.

Can we never escape imprisonment within our own pre-understanding? At first glance it would appear not. Biblical interpretation looks like one very vicious circle. My interpretation of the Bible is dictated by my pre-understanding. But I justify believing that pre-understanding on the grounds that it conforms to what the Bible teaches me. What the Bible has taught me, of course, was determined, in the first place, by the pre-understanding I had when I came to the Bible. That pre-understanding, of course, was justified by what the Bible taught me. What the Bible taught me, of course, was determined by my pre-understanding . . . ad infinitum.

We have this vicious circle operating in the debate over divine determinism. On the one hand, the divine determinist will find texts that (seen in the light of his pre-understanding) clearly "teach" divine determinism. On the other hand, the limited determinist will find texts that (illuminated by his pre-understanding) "teach" limited determinism.

Philosophers label this circular interdependence between one's interpretation of the biblical text and one's pre-understanding the HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE. As we saw earlier, the hermeneutical circle is alive and well in any debate over divine determinism. Each side of the doctrinal divide circumnavigates his own hermeneutical circle—justifying his doctrinal position by an appeal to what the Bible teaches while, at the

same time, deliberately reading his Bible in a manner purposed to ensure support for his prior doctrinal position. This hermeneutical circle appears to be inescapable. But it is not. Due to the inherent tensions that will and must exist within a false pre-understanding, there is a way out.

## ESCAPING THE HERMENEUTICAL CIRCLE

I accept as axiomatic that *a true understanding of reality will be perfectly coherent and self-consistent* and, even more importantly, that *a false understanding of reality will be at some point incoherent and self-contradictory*. This is a necessary implication of the biblical view of God as Logos and the cosmos as a rational creation.<sup>49</sup>

Now my pre-understanding—the set of prior assumptions I bring with me to the biblical text—includes every belief I have about anything. If my pre-understanding is true in every detail, then it will be perfectly coherent and self-consistent. In such an event, the hermeneutical circle would indeed be vicious, but in a benevolent sort of way. My perfectly true prior assumptions about reality will dictate my interpretation of the biblical text which will, in turn, confirm my perfectly true understanding of reality. But if—as we are assuming—my pre-understanding is unfailingly true to begin with, then neither it nor my interpretation of the Bible that has been shaped by it will ever come into conflict with sound reason nor with the objective meaning of the biblical text. That, of course, is not a problem.

But if my prior understanding of reality is false in any detail, then there must exist an inner tension, an internal incoherence, among some of the beliefs that make up my pre-understanding. This incoherence makes my pre-understanding vulnerable and ultimately implausible.<sup>50</sup>

How is a false pre-understanding vulnerable? Granted, a false pre-understanding will be incoherent and contradictory. That makes it vulnerable to sound logic. But, given the hermeneutical circle, how could it ever

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49. See chapter 3.

50. Such rational incoherence is not immediately obvious to me. If it were, I would not allow it to remain. Assuming I am committed to intellectual integrity, I would modify my understanding to fix any incoherence that becomes apparent. But the fact is—even assuming intellectual integrity—I inevitably live with various internal contradictions in my view of reality. Why? Because my understanding of reality is not perfect. Some of my beliefs are false, and false beliefs inevitably create incoherence in one's worldview. But this incoherence is fundamentally invisible to me; I am not yet aware of it. (Or, incoherence in my worldview can exist for still another reason: lack of intellectual integrity. Lack of intellectual integrity leads to a high tolerance for internal incoherence; and that, in turn, leads to my allowing incoherence to continue

be vulnerable to biblical revelation? How could my reading of the biblical text, controlled as it is by my pre-understanding, ever expose my pre-understanding as incoherent and false?

Very simply, the rational incoherence intrinsic to a false view of reality creates the potential for irreconcilable conflict within the pre-understanding itself. Such conflict is necessarily there in a false view of reality, though it may lie unnoticed for years. What is needed, if the hermeneutical circle is to be broken, is a catalyst to force the contradiction out into the open where it is visible. Any experience can be such a catalyst. It does not have to be the biblical text. But, for the believer, it often is. Such a catalyst text (if one exists) is a text that somehow forces me to make a choice between two conflicting beliefs that are causing rational disharmony in my pre-understanding. The catalyst text exposes the previously well-concealed contradiction and thereby forces a decision between the two conflicting assumptions.

Instinctively, I seek to interpret a text in such a way as to satisfy my pre-understanding. But a catalyst text (or, as I will call it from now on, a CONFUTER TEXT—that is, a text that confutes one's pre-understanding) has some feature that precludes this. It is a text where no possible interpretation can satisfy both (or all) aspects of my pre-understanding. Therefore, my inherent desire to interpret the text in the light of my pre-understanding is frustrated. I find myself confronted with a logical impossibility. I cannot accept two different interpretations, yet no single interpretation can satisfy every facet of my pre-understanding. (It is precisely because my prior beliefs are in irreconcilable conflict that I cannot satisfy all of those beliefs with one interpretation.) The only option open to me—if I maintain my intellectual integrity—is to modify my understanding of reality. One or more of my prior beliefs is false. I must decide which is false and must either reject it or modify it—adjusting my pre-understanding in whatever way is necessary in order to make a single interpretation of the confuter text possible. The net result: the text has changed the way I view the world. It has exposed the rational incoherence of my pre-understanding and forced me to fix it. If I fix it intelligently, it will lead me one step closer to an accurate understanding of reality—an understanding that conforms to biblical teaching.

## **THE GREAT ESCAPE: AN EXAMPLE**

Consider a relatively straightforward example of the above:

Early in my theological experience, my understanding of apostolic authority looked roughly like this: *The apostles were infallible. Hence, anything an apostle might claim about the gospel, the nature of the gospel, or anything related to the gospel should be accepted as true by virtue of his authority.* As I understood it then, the nature of apostolic authority was such that it was impossible, even in principle, for anything an apostle said about the faith to be wrong. At the same time, I believed that the apostles were ordinary, fallible human beings.

As a matter of fact, my working understanding of apostolic authority at that time was latently inconsistent and false. On the one hand, my view of apostolic authority entailed the personal infallibility of the individual apostles. On the other hand, it entailed that they were in every respect ordinary, fallible human beings.

The tension between these two beliefs never surfaced. Not until one day I gave due consideration to what proved to be a confuter text—Galatians 1:8, “But even though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.” Two things are quite clear from this statement by Paul, understood in its literary context: (1) Paul is making a statement that assumes that it would be theoretically possible for him to teach some version of the gospel that was damnably wrong, and (2) the touchstone of whether something he might say about the gospel is true is not whether it comes out of his mouth, but rather, whether it conforms to what had in fact been revealed to Paul by Jesus—a message and revelation that he, Paul, had already conveyed to the Galatians. Putting these two observations together, Paul did not understand his authority as an apostle to lie in him personally. He understood it to lie in the authority of the revealed truth that had been entrusted to him. He had been granted an infallible, authoritative understanding of God’s purposes in human history. The authority of Paul’s teaching derived from the fact that he had been granted such an understanding. To the extent that his teaching accurately and faithfully conveyed the gospel message that had been revealed to him, it possessed the authority of the infallible revelation itself. Theoretically, however, Paul could teach something that did not conform to the infallible revelation he had been granted. If that were to happen, Paul says, the Galatians should no longer believe him.

Galatians 1:8 makes clear how Paul conceived of his own authority: the locus of his apostolic authority lay in the infallible understanding of the gospel revealed to him, not in the person of Paul himself. No plausible interpretation of Galatians 1:8 would suggest the latter. For an apostle whose authority lay in his very person—that is, whose authority extended

to every statement that passed his lips—how could he ever be disregarded? Yet that is exactly what Paul recommends to the Galatians: disregard me if I should ever depart from what I have already taught you. Paul allows for the theoretical possibility of an apostolic mistake with respect to the gospel.

How can that be? Only if I was willing to adjust my understanding of the nature of apostolic authority could I make sense of the notion of an apostolic mistake in the teaching of the gospel. By recognizing that the locus of apostolic authority lay in the authority of the message entrusted to them and not in them as individuals, it became clear how an infallible authority could inhabit ordinary, fallible human beings. Namely, since their minds had been illumined to understand clearly and flawlessly the gospel of Jesus Christ, to that extent they were infallible. For such an understanding came to them through an infallible revelation from God. At the same time, being fallible human beings, the theoretical possibility always existed that they could fail or falter in conveying that infallible, revealed truth to others.

My original, faulty pre-understanding of the nature of apostolic authority did not generate a hermeneutical circle from which I could not escape. I was not trapped in my ignorance. The biblical text eventually exposed the logical incoherence of my pre-understanding and forced me to modify my view of apostolic authority. The Bible taught me! And as is often the case, it was a confuter text that exposed and forced me to correct the false view of apostolic authority contained in my pre-understanding.

## **Applying the Theory— Does the Bible Teach Divine Determinism?**

I turn now to the primary questions with which this chapter is concerned. Does the Bible teach divine determinism? And how would we determine whether it does?

### **THE INADEQUACY OF PROOF-TEXTING TO PROVE DIVINE DETERMINISM**

The popularly accepted method for answering such a question is proof-texting, a procedure we briefly discussed earlier. As I will immediately show, proof-texting cannot adequately establish divine determinism.

## PROOF TEXTS FOR DIVINE DETERMINISM

There are numerous texts that provide compelling evidence for divine determinism to anyone who already embraces it as true. If divine determinism is in fact true, it is most probable that these texts reflect the biblical authors' belief in it; in some cases by explicitly stating the doctrine, in others by implicitly assuming it. We have already seen one such verse:

...having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will...

Ephesians 1:11

If divine determinism is true, then this verse is most naturally interpreted as an explicit statement that literally everything that happens is the “working” of God in accordance with “the counsel of His will.”

Limited determinists are reluctant to interpret Ephesians 1:11 quite this straightforwardly. Primarily, because such an interpretation has implications that are unacceptable to them—namely, (1) that God would be the author of evil, and (2) that God would be the author of the freewill choices of human beings. But again, if divine determinism is in fact true, numerous texts provide evidence that God is ultimately responsible for the evil that occurs as well as the freewill choices of human beings. On the assumption that divine determinism is true, these texts are best interpreted as charging God with ultimate responsibility for both.

Some explicitly proclaim, in general terms, God's responsibility for evil, tragedy, and calamity:

...If a calamity [Hebrew = ra'ah = evil] occurs in a city has not the Lord done it?

Amos 3: 6

...That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun that there is no one besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity [Hebrew = ra'ah = evil]; I am the Lord who does all these.

Isaiah 45:6–7

Others pinpoint some specific evils (and most notably, some specific, evil freewill choices) for which God is explicitly claiming to be responsible.

For instance, the crucifixion of the innocent Jesus, the most spectacularly evil choice of all, is held to be God's responsibility.

...this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put to death.

Acts 2:23

For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy Servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.

Acts 4:27–28

Other evil acts are credited to God as well. For example, the invasion of Palestine by the Chaldeans.

For behold, I am raising up the Chaldeans,...then they will sweep through like the wind and pass on. But they will be held guilty, they whose strength is their god.

Habakkuk 1:6–11

and Pharaoh's decision to resist God and rebel against him

Thus I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will chase after them ...

Exodus 14:4

and Israel's stubborn rebellion against God

Why, O Lord, dost Thou cause us to stray from Thy ways, And harden our heart from fearing Thee? Return for the sake of Thy servants, the tribes of Thy heritage.

Isaiah 63:17

In fact, decisions by people in general are credited to God as being determined by him. The Scriptures mention several specific instances of it:

The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.



Proverbs 21:1

...for the Lord had caused them to rejoice, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them to encourage them in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel.

Ezra 6:22

...and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the Lord his God was upon him.

Ezra 7:6

And complex events of history are explicitly claimed to be his doing—

...For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure’ ...Truly I have spoken; truly I will bring it to pass. I have planned it, surely I will do it.

Isaiah 46:9–11

There are others, but these represent a healthy sample of the kinds of texts that divine determinism could offer as evidence, as proof texts, of the truth of their position.

## **THE FAILURE OF THE DIVINE DETERMINIST PROOF TEXTS**

But as we have already seen, such a procedure has serious limitations. It only proves divine determinism to the divine determinist! What a verse or passage means to any given individual will be shaped by his or her pre-understanding. Therefore, though the divine determinist can easily find a whole host of proof texts that are convincing to himself, none of them will be persuasive to the person who is not ready to be persuaded. The unpersuaded, in the light of their own respective pre-understandings, will interpret each of these proof texts quite differently—so that, to them, the texts prove nothing.

How exactly the limited determinist circumvents these proofs texts is not important. There will be as many different interpretations of these different proof texts as there are different unpersuaded interpreters. The important point is this: each limited determinist will indeed have an alter-

native, plausible interpretation of each and every one of these proof texts—one that no longer entails divine determinism.

### **PROOF TEXTS FOR LIMITED DETERMINISM**

The limited determinist can just as readily compile his own list of proof texts. As the divine determinist would grant, biblical evidence exists for the unadulterated goodness of God and for individual moral accountability for freewill choices. According to the limited determinist's pre-understanding, the implications of this are clear: if God is good, then he cannot cause evil; and if man is accountable for his choices, then they cannot be caused by God. So, from the limited determinist's perspective, a proof text that establishes the moral perfection of God is tantamount to a proof text that establishes that God does not cause evil. (For example, "...God is light and in him there is no darkness at all."—I John 1:5) Likewise, a proof text that establishes that man is responsible for his choices is tantamount to a proof text that God does not cause the choices of men. (For example, "...that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life"—John 3:16) In both cases, God's determinative control is proved to be limited.<sup>51</sup>

But once again, these limitations on God's control are proved only to the person already persuaded of limited determinism. These proof texts are unconvincing to the divine determinist, who is not already persuaded of limitations on divine control. He believes just as earnestly in the unadulterated goodness of God and in man's moral accountability. What is not proved to him is something else: that these two facts necessarily imply that God cannot cause evil and freewill choices. The limited determinist's proof texts do not satisfy him in this regard.

### **PROOF-TEXTING IS INCONCLUSIVE**

The inescapable reality of the hermeneutical circle means that one cannot settle the debate about divine determinism through proof texts. It is

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to exist.)

51. There is nothing wrong with this line of reasoning by the opponent of divine determinism—treating certain logical implications of the Bible's explicit teaching as facets of its authoritative teaching itself. This is a valid method. If the opponent of divine determinism is correct in his assertion that human moral accountability necessarily implies that God cannot be the cause of human choices, then he is correct in seeing biblical support for human accountability as decisive, authoritative proof against divine determinism. I will utilize this same line of rea-

virtually certain that one can find verses in the Bible “proving” his viewpoint, whether he is a divine determinist or a limited determinist. The verses are there, ready and waiting to be shaped by his pre-understanding into convincing evidence for his position. But as we have already seen, they are convincing only to the already persuaded. To the unpersuaded they offer no evidence at all. The divine determinist can find numerous biblical texts that show his position to be true. But so can the limited determinist.

Proof-texting, as popularly understood, brings us to an impasse. What the Bible actually teaches on the subject of God’s sovereignty cannot be decided on this basis. It must be decided on a completely different basis.

## **THE WAY TO PROVE DIVINE DETERMINISM: CHOOSING THE RIGHT PRE-UNDERSTANDING**

The divine determinist and the limited determinist interpret the Bible differently. Both approaches to the Bible are plausible, reasonable, intelligent, and logical, relative to their own respective sets of assumptions. But both are not valid, for both sets of assumptions are not valid. How am I to decide which is right?

The correct interpretation of a biblical text is the one that interprets it to mean what its author intended it to mean and to imply what its author intended it to imply. The correct interpretation will be an interpretation that is informed by the same set of assumptions that guided the biblical author as he wrote his text. To put it another way, the correct interpretation of a biblical text is one that is based on a correct pre-understanding—that is, on a pre-understanding that conforms substantially to the pre-understanding of the biblical author.<sup>52</sup>

To resolve the impasse in the proof-text battle over divine determinism, we must first establish which pre-understanding informed the biblical authors. Did the biblical authors write from a set of assumptions shared with divine determinists? Or from a set of assumptions shared with limited determinists? As they wrote, did the biblical authors begin with the

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soning at various points throughout this work.

52. Some are skeptical of the possibility of knowing an author’s intent and the pre-understanding which underlies his written text. This skepticism is not justified. Sound hermeneutical theory recognizes the fact that language works—and communication is possible—because an author’s intent is objectified in his words. To defend this claim and to explore exactly how one does discern an author’s intent from his words is beyond the scope of this work. For a discussion of this

assumption that divine determinism is a completely untenable position (as limited determinists assume)? Or did they begin with the assumption that divine determinism is true?

Establishing which is the correct pre-understanding (the one that corresponds to that of the biblical authors) is the place where our discussion must begin. Before we can know how to understand the implications of the proof texts listed above, we somehow need to determine what are correct prior assumptions with respect to divine determinism. Settling that question will automatically answer whether the Bible teaches divine determinism, for then we will have a host of evidential texts along with a correct orientation with respect to how to interpret them.

But how can we discover which is the correct pre-understanding? We discussed earlier the dynamic by which the hermeneutical circle can be broken. If we are to find a way out of the impasse to which the proof-texting dual leads, we must discover a “confuter text” that will expose the particular pre-understanding that is false. We must find an aspect of the Bible’s teaching that can bring to light the not-yet-visible inconsistencies in the incorrect pre-understanding. We need to locate some element of the Bible’s teaching that forces an either/or choice between some inviolable element of biblical truth and the fallacious pre-understanding regarding divine determinism.

## WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES

I maintain that such “confuter texts” do exist—namely, those texts that teach divine creation *ex nihilo* and those texts that explain the fact and nature of divine foreknowledge. Creation *ex nihilo* is the doctrine that God created all of reality out of absolutely nothing.<sup>53</sup> Divine foreknowledge refers to God’s ability to know and predict the future in advance.

One cannot maintain that God is the creator of everything out of nothing and at the same time, with rational consistency, deny divine deter-

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issue, I recommend *The Language of God* by Ron Julian, J.A. Crabtree, and David Crabtree.

53. The Bible’s teaching is that, starting from absolutely nothing (except himself), God created the entire created order and every particular in it. He created not only the stuff of reality, but the structure of reality. The doctrine of creation from out of nothing denies that there was any pre-existent stuff, structure, or reality of any kind from which God fashioned the cosmos. Before the creation, literally nothing existed other than God himself. There is a Latin phrase that is often used to refer to this biblical doctrine of creation—*creatio ex nihilo* (meaning, creation out of nothing). Throughout the book, I may occasionally use this Latin phrase or a Latin-English hybrid, CREATION EX NIHILLO, to refer to this biblical doctrine of creation out

minism—unless one is willing to deny some other basic tenet of common sense. So, if we accept the biblical teaching about God’s creatorship, we are forced, by logical necessity, to accept divine determinism. Similarly, if we accept the biblical teaching about God’s foreknowledge, we are forced to embrace divine determinism.

Those who accept the biblical view of God’s creatorship and foreknowledge and yet insist that divine determinism cannot be true are embracing a rationally inconsistent worldview. Their pre-understanding is fraught with logical tension. Ultimately, the inconsistency of their worldview must be resolved. Apart from the possibility of denying basic, indisputable assumptions about language, reason, and truth, one has only two possible options for resolving the inevitable conflict: (1) he can reverse his prior denial of divine determinism, or (2) he can reject the doctrines of creation *ex nihilo* and divine foreknowledge. Any Christian who is anxious to submit to the authority of Scripture and to uphold the objectivity of verbal communication cannot possibly reject these latter two doctrines. They are too clearly taught by Scripture and (in the case of divine creation) too philosophically essential to be denied.<sup>54</sup> The only reasonable response is to acknowledge the truth of divine determinism.

In this sense, then, the Bible teaches us that a pre-understanding that accepts divine determinism is the one that coheres with the biblical worldview. Hence, divine determinism is the pre-understanding that will lead to a true and accurate understanding of biblical revelation as a whole. Conversely, a pre-understanding that denies divine determinism is rationally incompatible with the biblical worldview and, hence, can only lead to false and distorted interpretations of the biblical text.

In saying this, of course, I am presuming to be right in my insistence that divine determinism is logically required by God’s creatorship and foreknowledge. But I have not made any case for such a claim. That task still remains. The next two chapters are devoted to demonstrating what I have simply presumed above—namely, that divine determinism is a logically necessary ramification of God’s creatorship and foreknowledge. If my presumption that these two doctrines logically require divine deter-

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of absolutely nothing.

54. By ‘philosophically essential’ here I am suggesting that a philosophical proof of God’s existence, and more specifically, of God’s role as creator of the cosmos is possible. In general, I believe some of the classical proofs of God’s existence are on the right track and are based on rationally sound intuitions. Most of them are attempts at formulating formal proofs that reflect deep rational intuitions. Unfortunately, they are probably unsuccessful at capturing completely the rational intuitions and sound reasoning that underlie them. Nevertheless, the sub-conscious intuitive reasoning that these formal proofs are attempting to capture has persuaded millions of

minism is correct, then we cannot escape the conclusion that the Bible teaches divine determinism. It clearly teaches creation *ex nihilo* and divine foreknowledge. If divine determinism is the only way one can, with rational consistency, account for these two truths, then it must be the view of reality that underlies all that the Bible says. To think otherwise would be to charge biblical revelation with being logically incoherent, and for someone like me, who accepts the traditional view of biblical authority, that would be untenable. Divine determinism, therefore, is appropriately the pre-understanding through which we interpret every biblical text. As a result, the correct interpretation of the Bible turns out to be the one that yields a long list of proof texts supporting divine determinism.

## Summary

Does the Bible teach divine determinism? Yes, I think it does. But one will never be convinced through a series of proof texts. Proof-texting is compelling only to one who is already persuaded. To one who needs to be persuaded, it is a futile exercise. Ultimately, one will become convinced only when he grasps the necessary logical implications of God's being (i) the creator, and (ii) the one who knows the future. Only then can he see the rational necessity of divine determinism and the inconsistency of any other view of God's nature and power.