

God, Omnipotence, and Evil:

Exploring God's Omnipotence, Omniscience, and Omnibenevolence through the Book of Genesis

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Introduction: Puzzles of Logic

- Example: If God is omnipotent and omniscient, can He do something that He didn't think of before?
- Pitting omnipotence against omniscience is a *logical* problem. Either one has to take precedence.

Biblical Texts Indicating *Something* over Omnipotence within God¹

1. God's regret, showing that God was not pleased with the outcome of some human decisions. Regret would not be an appropriate expression if God controlled a human being in such a way that they had no real choice in the matter:
 - a. Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord *was sorry* that He had made man on the earth, and He *was grieved* in His heart. (Gen.6:5–6)
 - b. Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel, saying, "*I regret* that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me, and has not carried out My commands." (1 Sam.15:10)
2. Various "moral outrage" passages, showing that God was not pleased with the moral decisions of some people. Expressions of moral outrage would be disingenuous if God did not actually give people moral agency.
 - a. But I am very angry with the nations who are at ease; for *while I was only a little angry, they furthered the disaster*. (Zech.1:15)
 - b. Nathan then said to David, "You are the man! Thus says the LORD God of Israel, 'It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. I also gave you your master's house and your master's wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these! *Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight?* You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. (2 Sam.12:7–9)
 - c. Then he began to *denounce* the cities in which most of his miracles were done, *because they did not repent*. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you. (Mt.10:20–24; Lk.10:12–16)
 - d. Truly I say to you, all these things will come upon this generation. Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! *How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling*. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate! For I say to you, from now on you will not see me until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!'" (Mt.23:36–39; Lk.13:33–35; 19:41–44)
 - e. *I gave her time to repent, and she does not want to repent* of her immorality. (Rev.2:21; 9:20–21; 16:9–11)
3. Various "I did not intend that" passages, expressing God's disassociation from a certain event:
 - a. The LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for *they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them*. Like all the

¹ See Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984)

- deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day--in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods--*so they are doing to you also.*" (1 Sam.8:7-8)
- b. And he said to him, "Thus says the Lord, 'Because *you have let go out of your hand the man whom I had devoted to destruction*, therefore your life shall go for his life, and your people for his people.'" (1 Ki.20:42)
 - c. Oh, rebellious children...who carry out a plan, *but not mine*; who make an alliance, but *against my will*, adding sin to sin. (Is. 30:1)
 - d. If anyone fiercely assails you *it will not be from Me*. Whoever assails you will fall because of you. (Isa.54:15)
 - e. By refusing to be baptized by [John], the Pharisees and the lawyers *rejected God's purpose for themselves*. (Lk.7:30)
4. Various "what more could I have done?" and "in vain" passages, showing that God wanted more human response than how people actually responded:
- a. The Lord said to Moses, "*How long* will this people spurn Me? And *how long* will they not believe in Me, *despite all* the signs which I have performed in their midst? I will smite them with pestilence and dispossess them, and I will make you into a nation greater and mightier than they." (Num.14:11-12)
 - b. And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah, Judge between Me and My vineyard. "*What more was there to do* for My vineyard that I have not done in it? *Why*, when I expected it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?" (Isa.5.3-4)
 - c. *In vain* I punished your people; they did not respond to correction. (Jer.2:30)
 - d. During the reign of King Josiah, the LORD said to me, "Have you seen what faithless Israel has done? She has gone up on every high hill and under every spreading tree and has committed adultery there. *I thought* that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not, and her unfaithful sister Judah saw it." (Jer.3:6)
 - e. Then I said, "How I would set you among My sons and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of the nations! And I said [*thought*], 'You shall call Me, My Father, and not turn away from following Me.'" (Jer.3:19)
 - f. *What shall I do* with you, O Ephraim? *What shall I do* with you, O Judah? For your loyalty is like a morning cloud, and like the dew which goes away early. (Hos.6:4)

Biblical Texts Indicating *Something* over Omniscience within God

5. Various "testing" passages, showing that in these cases, God does not know what a person will actually decide, though He might know the range of possible choices:
- a. God *tested* Abraham (Gen.22:1)... "*Now I know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." (22:12)
 - b. And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, *testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.* (Dt.8:2)
 - c. And even in the matter of the envoys of the rulers of Babylon, who sent to him to inquire of the wonder that had happened in the land, *God left him alone only to test him, that He might know all that was in his heart.* (2 Chr.32:21)
 - d. Yet, O Lord of hosts, *who tests* the righteous, who sees the mind and the heart. (Jer.20:12)
6. Various "if" or "may" or "maybe" passages, showing that God was giving people a real choice, and didn't know what their choice would be:
- a. You will go to my country and to my relatives, and take a wife for my son Isaac... *But if* the woman is not willing to follow you, then you will be free from this my oath (Gen.24:4, 8)
 - b. The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see *if* they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and *if* not, I will know. (Gen.18:20-21)
 - c. And it shall come about that *if* they will not believe you or heed the witness of the first sign, they *may* believe the witness of the last sign. (Ex.4:8)

- d. Now when Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near; for God said, “The people *might* change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.” (Ex.13:17)
 - e. Then David said, “O LORD God of Israel, Your servant has heard for certain that Saul is seeking to come to Keilah to destroy the city on my account. Will the men of Keilah surrender me into his hand? *Will Saul come down* just as Your servant has heard? O LORD God of Israel, I pray, tell Your servant.” And the LORD said, “*He will come down.*” (1 Sam.23:10–11) But Saul did *not come down*, because David did not go that way.
 - f. For *if* you truly amend your ways and your deeds, *if* you truly practice justice between a man and his neighbor... (Jer.7:5)
 - g. For *if* you men will indeed perform this thing, then... But *if* you will not obey these words... (Jer.22:4–5)
 - h. This is what the LORD says: Stand in the courtyard of the LORD’s house and speak to all the people of the towns of Judah who come to worship in the house of the LORD. Tell them everything I command you; do not omit a word. *Perhaps* they will listen and each will turn from his evil way. Then I will relent and not bring on them the disaster I was planning because of the evil they have done. (Jer.26:2–3) *If* you will not listen to Me, to walk in My law which I have set before you... (Jer.26:4)
 - i. *Perhaps* when the people of Judah hear about every disaster I plan to inflict on them, each of them will turn from his wicked way; then I will forgive their wickedness and their sin. (Jer.36:3) *Perhaps* their supplication will come before the Lord, and everyone will turn from his evil way, for great is the anger and the wrath that the Lord has pronounced against this people. (Jer.36:7)
 - j. Suddenly Babylon has fallen and been broken; wail over her! Bring balm for her pain; *perhaps* she may be healed. (Jer.51:8)
 - k. Therefore, son of man, pack your belongings for exile and in the daytime, as they watch, set out and go from where you are to another place. *Perhaps* they will understand, though they are a rebellious house. (Ezk.12:3f)
 - l. And when they had approached Jerusalem and had come to Bethphage, to the Mount of Olives, then Jesus sent two disciples, saying to them, “Go into the village opposite you, and immediately you will find a donkey tied there and a colt with her; untie them, and bring them to Me. And *if* anyone says something to you, you shall say, ‘The Lord has need of them,’ and immediately he will send them.” (Mt.21:1–3)
 - m. The owner of the vineyard said, “What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; *perhaps* they will respect him.” (Lk.20:13)
7. The “divine counsel” motif, when God invites consultation from his human partners, and then changes His mind:
- a. Abraham came near and said, “Will You indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city... Far be it from You to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous and the wicked are treated alike... (Gen.18:23–25) Then he said, “Oh may the Lord not be angry, and I shall speak only this once; suppose ten are found there?” And He said, “*I will not destroy it* on account of the ten.” (Gen.18:32)
 - b. The Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, *that My anger may burn* against them and that I may destroy them...” Then Moses entreated the Lord his God, and said, “O Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people...? Turn from Your burning anger and *change Your mind* about doing harm to Your people...” So the Lord *changed His mind* about the harm which He said He would do to His people. (Ex.32:9–14) emphasizing Moses’ choice to intercede with God for Israel.
 - c. Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness, just as You also have forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now.” So the Lord said, “I have pardoned them *according to your word*... (Num.11:19–20) emphasizing Moses’ choice to intercede with God for Israel.
 - d. The Lord *changed His mind* about this... The Lord *changed His mind* about this. (Amos 7:1–6)

8. Various “conditional” present or “conditional” futures, showing that Jesus was not certain exactly when something would happen:
 - a. “Therefore when you see the abomination of desolation which was spoken of through Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains; let him who is on the housetop not go down to get the things out that are in his house; and let him who is in the field not turn back to get his cloak. But woe to those who are with child and to those who nurse babes in those days! *But pray that your flight may not be in the winter, or on a Sabbath.*” (Mt.25:14–20)

What is that *Something*? Let’s study the interactions between God and people in Genesis. Narrative itself as a literary genre, as opposed to poetic epic, enables a narrator the freedom to develop the relational complexities of people with a covenantal God.

God’s Speech-Acts in Genesis

How do we identify God’s activity in history? God began a pattern of speaking and then acting in Genesis, which continued throughout the Old Testament as an unbroken pattern, so much so that Amos said,

“Surely the LORD God will do nothing except that which He reveals [i.e. *speaks*] to His servants the prophets [who also then *speak*].” (Amos 3:7)

This pattern helps us know what God does and what people do, and how to distinguish between them. In Creation, God spoke ten times to bring about life and bless life (Gen.1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28). Afterwards, God spoke to (1) bring forth physical life; or (2) invite spiritual life (His promises called forth faith and hope); or (3) protect the lives of the chosen family who would ultimately birth Jesus.

Let’s take the Genesis story in segments to consider this pattern:

Genesis 37–50: Joseph, Judah, and Brothers

God Spoke: Commands and Promises

- ^{37:2} Joseph, when seventeen years of age, was pasturing the flock with his brothers... And Joseph brought back a bad report about them to their father... ⁵ Then Joseph had a dream... ⁷ ... “we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf rose up and also stood erect; and behold, your sheaves gathered around and bowed down to my sheaf”... ⁹ Now he had still another dream...
- ^{38:27} It came about at the time she [Tamar] was giving birth, that behold, there were twins in her womb.
- ^{39:2} The LORD was with Joseph
- ^{39:3} Now his master saw that the LORD was with him.
- ^{39:5} The LORD blessed the Egyptian’s house on account of Joseph; thus the LORD’s blessing was upon all that he owned, in the house and in the field.
- ^{39:23} The LORD was with him [in the jail]; and whatever he did, the LORD made to prosper.
- ^{40:8} Then Joseph said to them, “Do not interpretations belong to God? Tell it to me, please.”
- ^{41:38} “Can we find a man like this, in whom is a divine spirit?”
- ^{41:51} Joseph named the firstborn Manasseh, “For,” he said, “God has released me from all the debt of my hardship, and of all my father’s house.” ⁵² He named the second Ephraim, “For,” he said, “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.”
- ^{45:7} God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant in the earth, and to keep you alive by a great deliverance. ⁸ Now, therefore, it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his household and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father, and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, ‘God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.’”

Consequential Human Choices

- *Jacob and family might have handled Joseph’s dreams very differently.*

- o Joseph showed leadership and skill at caring for the flock at seventeen years of age, which is implied by his negative report about his brothers to his father Jacob (37:1–2). So the two dreams involving bowing down to Joseph (37:5–11) already had some basis in their lived experience.
- o However, Judah, not Joseph, would be the firstborn son of Jacob (49:8–12). As we see in the narrative and the later Sinai law (Dt.21:15–17), God was already committed to Leah being the wife through whom the firstborn son would be named, because Leah was the first wife prior to Rachel, and God respected His own creation order for marriage (Gen.2:18–25) even though His people were corrupted.²
- o Therefore, Jacob and his sons might have taken the occasion of Joseph’s dreams to reflect on what exactly they meant, ask God in prayer about their family conflict, and receive God’s guidance without Joseph being betrayed. Jacob could have repented of his favoritism then!
- o Joseph’s later statement to his brothers, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good,” (50:20; 45:5–8) cannot be taken to mean that God uses a good end to justify evil means, and caused their evil betrayal of Joseph. Rather, despite human intentions for evil, God always works for good. God always works for life, simply because that is who He is. Hence, no matter what other people intend, evil or good, God always intends good.
- o *Meanwhile, however, God did have to teach Joseph and then work through him to undo the sinful attitudes of his family, so that they could be a blessing to the world around them and train their descendants as a future chosen nation how to be God’s partners in blessing.*

Genesis 27–35: Jacob, Leah, and Rachel

God Spoke: Commands and Promises

- ^{28:12} He had a dream, and behold, a ladder was set on the earth with its top reaching to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³ And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, “I am the LORD, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie, I will give it to you and to your descendants... ¹⁵ Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”
- ^{29:31} Now the LORD saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.
- ^{30:22} Then God remembered Rachel, and God gave heed to her and opened her womb. ²³ So she conceived and bore a son and said, “God has taken away my reproach.” ²⁴ She named him Joseph, saying, “May the LORD give me another son.”
- ^{30:43} So the man became exceedingly prosperous, and had large flocks...
- ^{31:3} Then the LORD said to Jacob, “Return to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you.”
- ^{31:9} Thus God has taken away your father’s livestock and given them to me... ¹¹ Then the angel of God said to me in the dream, “Jacob,” and I said, “Here I am.” ¹² He said, “Lift up now your eyes and see that all the male goats which are mating are striped, speckled, and mottled; for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. ¹³ I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar, where you made a vow to Me; now arise, leave this land, and return to the land of your birth.”
- ^{31:24} God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night and said to him, “Be careful that you do not speak to Jacob either good or bad.”
- ^{32:1} Now as Jacob went on his way, the angels of God met him. ² Jacob said when he saw them, “This is God’s camp.” So he named that place Mahanaim.
- ^{32:24} Then Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. ... ³⁰ So Jacob named the place Peniel, for he said, “I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved.” ³¹ Now the sun rose upon him just as he crossed over Penuel, and he was limping on his thigh.

Consequential Human Choices

- *Jacob could have been far more proactive in rooting out his own sin of favoritism.*

² Notice, similarly, that Abraham and Sarah had to abandon any notion of naming an adoptive heir (Gen.15:1–6) or using a surrogate mother (Gen.16:1–16). Instead, because God respected His own design for marriage, God waited until they finally believed He would bring about a supernaturally born son to them in their old age.

- o After the tragedy of Shechem raping his daughter Dinah (Gen.34), who was a daughter of Leah and thus rather overlooked by Jacob, Jacob did not take sufficient actions on Dinah's behalf to satisfy the sons of Leah, Dinah's full brothers.
- o Additionally, Jacob gave every indication that he would name Joseph, son of Rachel, as the firstborn son (Gen.37), not any of the sons of Leah, despite the fact that they were older than Joseph, and the fact that Leah was the first wife of Jacob, which was important in God's vision.
- o Instead, God had to wait one full generation to work through Joseph and Judah for Jacob to finally renounce his sin of favoritism, releasing Benjamin, Rachel's second son and his next favorite (Gen.42:1–43:14). God later legislated directly against such favoritism in the issue of naming a firstborn even from the lesser loved of two wives (Dt.21:15–17), to be unambiguous to the people of Israel.
- o On his deathbed, the spiritually changed Jacob finally named Judah, the oldest morally eligible son of Leah, to be the firstborn son and future recipient of the kingship (Gen.49:8–12).
- o *Meanwhile, however, God did have to fulfill His word of blessing on Jacob, bringing him back to the land with heirs.*

Genesis 24–26: Isaac and Rebekah

God Spoke: Commands and Promises

- ^{25:21} Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. ²² But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the LORD. ²³ The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb; and two peoples will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the older shall serve the younger."
- ^{26:12} Now Isaac sowed in that land and reaped in the same year a hundredfold. And the LORD blessed him, ¹³ and the man became rich, and continued to grow richer until he became very wealthy

Consequential Human Choices

- *Isaac and Rebekah could have had twelve sons.*
 - o Isaac's uncle Nahor had twelve sons (22:20–24), as did Isaac's older half-brother Ishmael (25:12–18), which is not coincidentally symmetrical with Jacob, one generation later. The narrative implication is that Isaac and Rebekah could have had twelve sons, too. But Isaac is portrayed in the narrative as unusually passive and self-indulgent. He prayed for Rebekah's fertility and God answered them with twin boys, Jacob and Esau (25:19–21). Isaac could have prayed much more than that. He did not care to witness to the Philistines (26:1–22), who could have provided God-fearing daughters to marry.
 - o Also implied: Isaac could have heeded God's word to Rebekah about Jacob being the firstborn, rather than Esau (25:22–26). Instead, he favored Esau based on his stomach and the savory game Esau hunted.
 - o By comparison, Abraham sought a wife for Isaac (24:1–67) from a part of his extended family that preserved some reverence for God in an otherwise dangerous and idolatrous world. Isaac, however, did not seek wives for either Esau or Jacob (passivity and self-indulgence). His son Jacob's engagement with Laban's side of the family could have been very different.
 - o *Meanwhile, however, God had to be faithful to His promise to Abraham and Sarah to make Isaac and Rebekah and their descendants a blessing to the world around them.*

Genesis 12–22: Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar

God Spoke: Commands and Promises

- ^{12:1} Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you..." ³ and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse..." ⁷ The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land."
- ^{12:17} But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

- ^{15:1} After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great”... ⁴ Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “...one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir”... ¹³ God said to Abram, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions... ¹⁶ Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete.”
- ^{16:7} Now the angel of the LORD found [Hagar] by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ He said, “Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from and where are you going?... Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority... I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count... Behold, you are with child, and you will bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has given heed to your affliction...”
- ^{17:1} Now when Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless. ² I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and I will multiply you exceedingly... ¹¹ And you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin, and it shall be the sign of the covenant between Me and you... ¹⁵ As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. ¹⁶ I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her... ²⁰ As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. ²¹ But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.”
- ^{18:1} Now the LORD appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre... ¹³ “Why did Sarah laugh, saying, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, when I am so old?’ ¹⁴ Is anything too difficult for the LORD? At the appointed time I will return to you, at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” ¹⁵ Sarah denied it however, saying, “I did not laugh”; for she was afraid. And He said, “No, but you did laugh.”
- ^{18:16} Then the men rose up from there, and looked down toward Sodom; and Abraham was walking with them to send them off. ¹⁷ The LORD said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do... ²⁰ The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave.”
- ^{19:1} Now the two angels came to Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting in the gate of Sodom.
- ^{20:3} But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married.” ⁴ Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, “Lord, will You slay a nation, even though blameless?”
- ^{21:17} God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. ¹⁸ Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink. ²⁰ God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness and became an archer.
- ^{22:1} Now it came about after these things, that God tested Abraham... ¹² He said, “...for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”

Consequential Human Choices

- *Abraham and Sarah did not need to enlist Hagar as a surrogate mother*
- God had promised Abram and Sarai a son supernaturally born to them in their old age (12:1–9). He demonstrated His commitment *to their marriage, not simply Abraham’s virility*, immediately after giving this promise, when He protected Sarah from being taken by Pharaoh (12:10–20). God reiterated this promise when Abraham asked about simply adopting Eleazar, his most trusted servant in the household, to be his heir. God reminded Abraham of His promise of a biological son, implicitly, born of Sarah (15:1–6).
- So the involvement of Hagar, though culturally acceptable at the time (16:1–16), was not intended by God.
- Nor did Abraham and Sarah need to ultimately part ways with Hagar and Ishmael so poorly (21:1–14). Thus, had the parting with Hagar and Ishmael been on better terms, and required such faith from Abraham in God’s ability to prevent them from certain death in the wilderness (founded on God’s promise to bless Ishmael in 17:20), there might not have been a need for God to ask Abraham to sacrifice Isaac with absolute faith in God’s ability to raise Isaac from certain death.
- Alternatively, if Sarah and Abraham had not enlisted Hagar as a surrogate mother, and Ishmael had never been born, there would not have been a need for the sacrifice of Isaac, either.

- *Meanwhile, however, God had to be faithful to His promise to Abraham and Sarah to make them a blessing to the world, and bring forth children from them who will bless the world, and eventually bring forth one who would undo the fall itself by cleansing the corruption of sin out from human nature.*

Genesis 1–11: God and Human Origins

God Spoke: Commands and Promises

- ^{2:16} The LORD God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; ¹⁷ but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” ¹⁸ Then the LORD God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper suitable for him.”
- ^{3:14} The LORD God said to the serpent, “Because you have done this, cursed are you more than all cattle, And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel”... ^{3:16} To the woman He said... ¹⁷ Then to Adam He said,
- ^{3:22} Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever”—²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden, to cultivate the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ So He drove the man out...
- ^{4:15} So the LORD said to him, “Therefore whoever kills Cain, vengeance will be taken on him sevenfold.” And the LORD appointed a sign for Cain, so that no one finding him would slay him.
- ^{6:3} Then the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not strive with man forever”... ¹³ Then God said to Noah, “The end of all flesh has come before Me... ¹⁸ But I will establish My covenant with you...” ^{9:1} And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...” ¹¹ I establish My covenant with you; and all flesh shall never again be cut off by the water of the flood, neither shall there again be a flood to destroy the earth.”
- ^{11:6} The LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.”

Consequential Human Choices

- *Nimrod and company did need to build a tower.*
 - o They could have trusted that God would not bring another flood.
- *Noah’s contemporaries did not have to become violent, build harems, and threaten Noah.*
 - o God did have to preserve a line of faithful people in the violent days of Noah’s time, lest there be no messianic hope carried forward and no Jesus. So there had to be a flood.
 - o Jesus ultimately presented himself to those who died before him to present them with a choice to choose him (1 Pet.3:18–20; 4:6).
- *Cain and his family did not have to become violent.*
 - o Cain could have trusted in God’s mysterious sign.
- *Adam and Eve did not need to eat from the Tree of Knowledge.*
 - o They could have just trusted God to define good and evil for them.
 - o But once they did, God had to exile them from the garden, to stop us from eating from the Tree of Life while in a corrupted state, and making the corruption of sin immortal.³

Hypothesis Confirmed: God’s Love Comes Before His Omniscience and Omnipotence

³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* 3.23.6. “Wherefore also He drove him out of Paradise, and removed him far from the tree of life, not because He envied him the tree of life, as some venture to assert, but because He pitied him, [and did not desire] that he should continue a sinner for ever, nor that the sin which surrounded him should be immortal, and evil interminable and irremediable. But He set a bound to his [state of] sin, by interposing death, and thus causing sin to cease, putting an end to it by the dissolution of the flesh, which should take place in the earth, so that man, ceasing at length to live to sin, and dying to it, might begin to live to God.”

God is Triune	□□	Omnibenevolence	□□	He invites us to freely choose to always choose Him forever, first via the Tree of Life, and then via Jesus
		Omniscience	□□	He knows <i>all possible futures</i> because of human free will; there is not only one possible future
		Omnipotence	□□	“ <i>Constrained</i> ” to do good and bring life <i>by speaking</i> , although God does not experience it as a “constraint”

If God is Triune, then His nature and character is self-giving love. Love is the *Something* above omniscience and omnipotence.

God’s love requires human free will. After the fall, God *had* to eventually restore human nature Himself, becoming incarnate in Jesus, because of His love for us. If He did not heal human nature in Jesus, and if He let our human nature stay corrupted instead, then He would have been unloving.

In order to do that, God needed an Israel: human partners who would co-diagnose the disease of sin with God, document the disease, reorient their lives to prepare themselves for the cure, and be so committed to the cure not only for themselves but for the whole world that they would freely give their lives as a reflection of the self-giving love within the Triune God made manifest in Jesus.

If omnibenevolence is primary in God, then God’s omniscience must respect that commitment: God must know all possible futures (*omniscience* under love), but does not know “the one actual future” in every detail.⁴

But God is not a passive observer of time, history, and human events. To bring about the birth of Jesus and his mission to the world, He must do that which preserves His chosen people and protects the human development of Jesus (*omnipotence* under love). He spoke His word that stimulated hope and faith in Israel, and protected them, too.

The Genesis narrative shows that human beings could have acted differently in every single instance. They certainly did not need to sin in order for God’s purposes to be fulfilled. The following contrast may help:

Humans Caused Evil by Abusing Free Will Irenaeus (130–200 AD)	God Caused Evil Through Humans John Calvin (1509–1564)
“God made man <i>a free [agent] from the beginning</i> , possessing his own power, even as he does his own soul, to obey the behests of God voluntarily, and <i>not by compulsion of God</i> . For there is <i>no coercion with God</i> , but a good will [towards us] is present with Him continually. And therefore does He give good counsel to all. And in man, as well as in angels, He has placed the power of choice (for angels are rational beings), so that those who had yielded obedience might justly possess what is good, given indeed by God, but preserved by themselves... For it is in man’s power to disobey God, and to forfeit what is good... If then it were not in our power to do or not to do these things, what reason had the apostle, and much more the Lord Himself, to give us counsel to do some things, and to abstain from others? But <i>because man is possessed of free will from the beginning, and</i>	“God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his posterity; but also <i>at his own pleasure arranged it</i> .” ⁶ “Nothing is more absurd than to think anything at all is done but by the ordination of God....Every action and motion of every creature is so governed by the <i>hidden counsel of God</i> , that nothing can come to pass, but what was ordained by Him....The wills of men are so governed by the will of God, that they are carried on straight to the mark which He has fore-ordained.” ⁷ “But if He did not will it, we could not do it. I admit this... I concede more—that thieves and murderers, and other evil-doers, are instruments of Divine Providence, being employed by the Lord himself to execute the Judgments which he has resolved to

⁴ Christian philosophers have debated the relationship of God and time; but whether it is possible for us to know such things (for example, what does it mean to say that God is outside time and knows everything at once?), from a functional perspective, it appears possible to say that God, because of His love for us, also committed Himself to time.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes*, book 3, ch.23, section 7, emphasis mine; notice the neglect of the pattern of God’s speech-acts (Amos 3:7).

⁷ Ibid, book 1, ch.16, section 3, emphasis mine; notice that Calvin must posit a ‘hidden’ will of God.

<i>God is possessed of free will, in whose likeness man was created, advice is always given to him to keep fast the good, which thing is done by means of obedience to God.”</i> <i>“...making progress day by day, and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One. For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God.”</i>⁵	inflict. But I deny that this forms any excuse for their misdeeds.”⁸ “God does not merely passively permit such things by standing by and not stopping them. Rather, <i>he actively wills them</i> by ordaining them and then bringing them about, yet without himself thereby becoming the author of sin.”⁹
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And consider this startling quote from Eastern Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky:

“God becomes *powerless* before human freedom; He cannot violate it since it flows from His own omnipotence. Certainly man was created by the will of God alone; but he cannot be deified [made Holy] by it alone. A single will for creation, but two for deification. A single will to raise up the image, but two to make the image into a likeness. The love of God for man is so great that it cannot constrain; for there is no love without respect. Divine will always will submit itself to gropings, to detours, even to revolts of human will to bring it to a free consent.”¹⁰

Genesis 2:4–25: God and the Garden: Were the Two Trees Really Necessary?

God Spoke: Commands and Promises

- ⁹ Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. [Four rivers flowed out of the garden, suggesting God’s intention that humans spread the garden] ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, ¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.”
 - o Out of love for humans as physical beings, God had to make the Tree of Life and Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The two Trees represented God within the Creation, since God is both a life-giver and a law-giver. Both aspects flow out of God loving us.
 - o Out of love, God had to give Adam and Eve the opportunity to grow in goodness, even in the original Creation.

The Tree of Life:

- God has life in Himself above and beyond what He already gave humanity.
- God invited them, and all their children, to internalize Him by eating fruit from the Tree of Life.
- God, in His love, offers Himself to us by invitation. God, in His love, wants us to participate with His love and share His love, and He expresses Himself through commands or laws.
- Infinite growth in love makes sense for us. Humans, who are finite, drawn into relationship with God, who is infinite and loving, will therefore grow in love, infinitely.
- As Irenaeus of Lyons writes: “man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God, the Father planning everything well and giving His commands, the Son carrying these into execution and performing the work of creating, and the Spirit nourishing and increasing [what is made], but man making progress day by day, *and ascending towards the perfect, that is, approximating to the uncreated One*. For the Uncreated is perfect, that is, God.”¹¹

The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil:

⁵ Irenaeus (130–202 AD), *Against Heresies*, 4.37.1–4, and 4.38.3; cf. 4.4.3; 4.38; 4.39; 5:37. To see the unanimity of the early Christian theologians on human free will, save the later Augustine, see Mako Nagasawa, *Human Free Will and God’s Grace in the Early Church Fathers*, found here: <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/gods-goodness-creation>.

⁸ Ibid, book 1, ch.17, section 5; earlier theologians maintained that God upholds our being by His providence, but not our choices; Calvin maintains that God causes both our being *and* our choices.

⁹ John Piper and Justin Taylor, editors, *Suffering and the Sovereignty of God* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL: 2006), p.35, footnote 7.

¹⁰ Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1978), p.73.

¹¹ Irenaeus (130–202 AD), *Against Heresies*, 4.38.3 notable because he is the earliest writing theologian outside the New Testament, and because he was arguing against the Gnostics; he therefore had to defend the goodness of God and also the original goodness of the physical creation.

- God defines good and evil for all His creation.
- God, in His love, invites us to trust Him to define good and evil for us.
- God wanted Adam and Eve and all their descendants to grow in the knowledge of good and evil by growing in their experience of goodness, and continuing to reject evil.
- God called human beings to reject the ultimate act of usurping God: internalizing into themselves the desire to define good and evil from their own viewpoint.

The Two Trees:

- Two points make a line.
- The Tree of Life was in the “middle” of the garden (2:9). The Tree of Knowledge was nearby, but not at the center. God’s law-giving serves God’s life-giving.
- Each person was to trust God by putting his or her back to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and looking at the Tree of Life at the center of the garden, and then trusting God to give more life and love by eating from the Tree of Life.
- This was the invitation God gave: To freely choose to always choose to love God forever.