

Three Paradigms for Understanding

The book of Job presents the reality of both the natural and supernatural worlds without explaining how they impact each other. The author of Job simply accepts both views of reality as true without establishing boundaries of delineation between them the way that modern Western people do. Life may be viewed correctly under the model of cause and effect within a natural universe, and all the catastrophic events recorded in the first two chapters of Job are described for what they are: natural phenomena with natural causes behind them. While lightning is called the “fire of God,” there is no hint of an Olympian Zeus casting down lightning bolts or of any other such suspension of the chain of nature (Job 1:16). Job’s children are killed because a sudden, violent “wind swept in from the desert and struck the four corners of the house” (Job 1:19). Sabeans and Chaldeans raid Job’s goods and put his servants to the sword, acting according to their own wills, not as puppets being manipulated by supernatural strings (Job 1:15, 17).

Yet life may also be viewed correctly as the unfolding of the plan of an utterly sovereign God, and all the catastrophic events recorded in the first two chapters of Job may truthfully be described for what they are: the outworking of God’s eternal decree. In the epilogue of the book, the author describes Job’s agony as “all the trouble the Lord had brought upon him” (Job 42:11). Without making God the author of sin and without ever offering an explanation of how God’s decree is actually carried out in the material universe, the book of Job simply accepts the reality that it is God who has ordained all of this tragedy, employing the Hebrew word *ra* to describe it (רעה “injury, wrong, misery, evil, trouble,” Koehler and Baumgartner, 1958, pp. 899, 900).

However, the book of Job presents yet a third paradigm for understanding reality, a paradigm apparently unknown to the protagonist, Job himself: the conflict between Yahweh and

Satan. That conflict is revealed to the reader in the apocalypse that is part of the prologue to the book:

One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came with them. The Lord said to Satan, “Where have you come from?”

Satan answered the Lord, “From roaming through the earth and going back and forth in it.”

Then the Lord said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil” (Job 1:6-8).

This apocalypse unveils the conflict that lies behind the whole book, yet Job himself remains utterly unaware that such a conflict exists, even after Yahweh speaks to him from the whirlwind. In this conflict between the Lord and Satan, Satan becomes Job’s great antagonist, but Job experiences his suffering simply as the result of natural things. Satan is the one who “afflicted Job with painful sores from the soles of his feet to the top of his head” (Job 2:7), yet Job’s torturer remains behind the veil. While by faith Job accepts these tragedies as ultimately under the control of God, he is never given a glimpse of the malicious supernatural being that delights in torturing him.

As with how it deals with the connection between the natural and supernatural worlds, the book of Job does not compartmentalize the impact of the conflict between the Lord and Satan. The book simply accepts this paradigm for understanding reality as real, alongside the paradigm of the natural cause and effect world of ordinary human experience, and the paradigm of the ultimate sovereignty of God over all things (*cf.* Appendix B: The Chart Illustrating Three Ways of Understanding How the World Works). All three paradigms are real and conterminous. The tragic events Job undergoes are natural things with natural causes. Yet these events are the

outworking of a supernatural conflict between the Lord and Satan, a conflict that is every bit as real and every bit as impacting as the material causes that connect events within the natural world. And all of these things are under the overarching sovereignty of God, a God who is even involved in the death of sparrows (Matthew 10:29). It is as if three witnesses to the same event were to testify in court under oath, and each witness told the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Yet each witness told a different story, and while their stories did not contradict each other, at no point were their accounts exactly the same.

It should not surprise the modern reader to discover that the Bible simply assumes certain things to be true without attempting to reconcile and delineate them the way that Western thought does. While the Bible is one of the pillars on which Western Civilization is founded, it is not itself a product of Western thought. The Bible often assumes certain things to be true that seem contradictory to the Western mind. How can Jesus of Nazareth be fully divine and fully human, and yet one Person? How can there be only one God, yet three distinct Persons who are God: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit? How can God be completely sovereign, and yet human beings remain free moral agents, fully accountable for their own authentic choices? The Bible proclaims that all of these things are true, without ever explaining how, other than pointing to the greatness and majesty of God. The task of the theologian is not always to reconcile, but to proclaim biblical truth, biblically. This is what the Westminster Assembly did with the sovereignty of God, on the one hand, and the will of creatures and the nexus of events in the natural universe, on the other:

God, from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass: yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures;

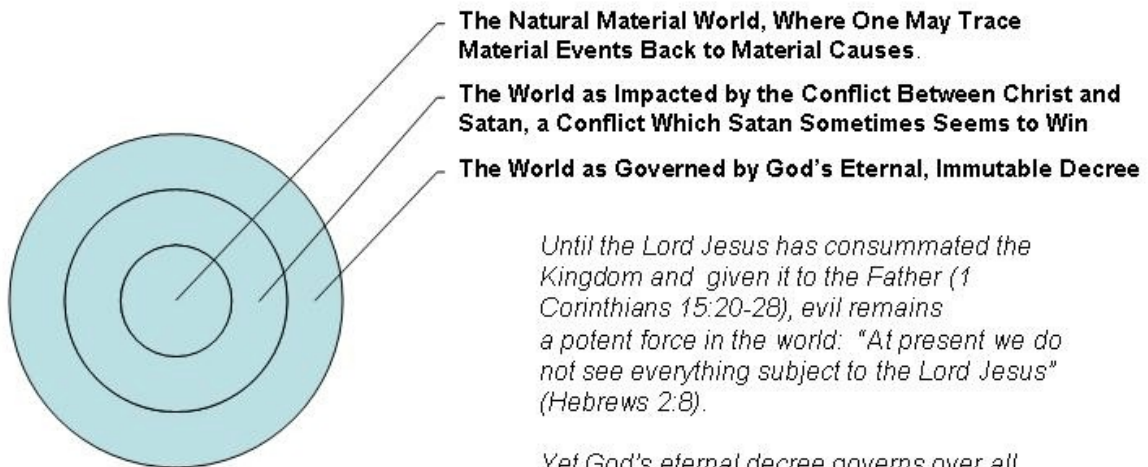
nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established (*The Westminster Confession of Faith* 1910, III, i, pp. 23, 24).

It is because the universe is more complex than humankind can ever comprehend simply by examining material things, that both predicting the future and fully comprehending why things have happened as they did in the past remain ultimately elusive. Awareness of this is an antidote to the hubris of modern man.

Appendix B

Chart Illustrating Three Ways of Understanding How the World Works

God Is Over All.
God Is not Part of His Creation,
But He Sovereignly Rules over all Things
By His Works of Creation and Providence.



Until the Lord Jesus has consummated the Kingdom and given it to the Father (1 Corinthians 15:20-28), evil remains a potent force in the world: "At present we do not see everything subject to the Lord Jesus" (Hebrews 2:8).

Yet God's eternal decree governs over all things (Ephesians 1:11).

God's will is always done on earth but not in the same way that it is done in heaven (Matthew 6:10).

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(The Westminster Confession of Faith III, i).