

# SALVATION AND SOVEREIGNTY: A REVIEW ESSAY

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In *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*, Dr. Ken Keathley presents his Molinist system with clarity and excellence to academia and the church of Jesus Christ at large. Since I have profited by studying theology under Keathley, and will study under him once more this coming semester, I can affirm that he is a man who not only demonstrates grace and humility in disagreement, but also demonstrates grace in the classroom. There is a need for more God-honoring theologians like him in the world. However, in this review, I will point out points of both agreement and disagreement from my perspective with his views as presented in *Salvation and Sovereignty*

Keathley accurately points out many flaws in the Calvinist system. I strongly affirm Keathley's assertion that "God is not the Author, Origin, or Cause of Sin (and to say that He is, is not just hyper-Calvinism but blasphemy)" (7). In chapter one, Keathley provides a tenable, biblical case for Molinism. He articulates the three logical moments of God's activity in Molinism (17-18) and examines both God's absolute sovereignty and human freedom in the Scriptures.

One of the most compelling aspects of Keathley's presentation on creaturely freedom is his "The Foreknowledge Entails Necessity Objection" (31), in which he distinguishes between "necessity" and "contingency." He makes the case that God's foreknowledge of an event does not mean that the event is causally determined by God; rather, divine foreknowledge exists because of the contingent choices of humans. This is essential if God has given persons creaturely freedom, which He has. Not only does Keathley present a strong case for contingency philosophically, but he also uses scriptural evidence to arrive at his conclusion. Biblical passages such as 1 Sam. 13:13-14, in which Samuel said to Saul, "the Lord *would* have permanently established your reign over Israel," demonstrate the existence of contingency: that is, the word "would" indicates a possibility, not a determined outcome. God "would" have established Saul's reign longer, but Saul's own evil choices ruin him (37). Keathley's convincing evidence regarding God's sovereign control and creaturely freedom make Molinism a very appealing system. I was initially drawn to Molinism because of "middle knowledge." Middle Knowledge Calvinists, such as Bruce Ware in *God's Greater Glory*, make a good case for Molinism as well. Ware argues in his work that were it not for middle knowledge the open theists would be right. God can never know too much.

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However, with that said, there are problems within Keathley's system. One of the major flaws in his work is the presupposition of tension in the biblical text. In a footnote on page 44, regarding God's undivided essence, Keathley states, "This means there is no division, *tension*, or conflict within God" (44). Nevertheless, when he arrives at the concepts of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, Keathley labels the relationship between the two concepts as a "tension" (126-29). At this point, believers must question Keathley's assumption. How can God not have tension within Himself and yet, the Word, the Holy Bible, contain tension? After all, statements made about God apply to the biblical text. For example, Jesus says in John 14:6 that He is "the truth"; in John 17:17 Jesus states, "Sanctify them by Your truth. *Your word is truth*" (NKJV). From these two passages, believers deduce that God is truth, and thus, His Word (that which He reveals about Himself) is truth. Paul describes God as one "who cannot lie" (Titus 1:2); from this, believers deduce that the Word, which reveals God's character and nature, cannot lie. In 2 Tim. 3:16, Paul tells Timothy that "all Scripture" is "inspired by God" (*theopneustos*). The word is literally translated as "God-breathed," indicating that the Word of God, the Scriptures, records the very words God has spoken about Himself. If the Word reveals the character and nature of God, and God has no tension within Himself, then how can the Word (which reveals God) contain tension within its pages? To affirm tension in the text requires the believer to also agree that God spoke something that is contrary to His character and nature. But how then, could He be the one who cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13)? God cannot be other than who He is. This is why David could confidently write in Psalm 23, "He leads me in the paths of righteousness *for His name's sake*" (Ps. 23:3b). Because God is who He is, He cannot be anything but just, righteous, pure, true, holy, etc. If God contains no tension within Himself, a truth to which Keathley also attests, then God, who has no tension, cannot speak tension in His Holy Word.

There is also the issue of logical consistency within Molinism. Keathley is committed to logical consistency. In his section titled "The Similarities of Infralapsarian Calvinism and Molinism," Keathley writes that infralapsarian Calvinism "leaves little room for a logically consistent understanding of permission" (141). His reason is that if God is the cause of all things (infralapsarian Calvinism's thesis), then there is no permission in such a system. However, Keathley then inserts Molinism: "I am arguing that *what Calvinists want to achieve in infralapsarianism*, Molinism actually accomplishes" (141). But is not Molinism essentially the same at this point as infralapsarian Calvinism? Infralapsarian Calvinism posits that "election is unconditional but reprobation is conditional. God actively ordains the salvation of the elect, but He only permits the damnation of the reprobate" (145). Now examine Molinism: "Molinism provides a better model for understanding how simultaneously *God's decree of election is unconditional while His rejection of the unbeliever is conditional*" (154). If infralapsarian Calvinism struggles with logical consistency (141), would not Molinism bear the same problem since it holds to the *exact same thing* as infralapsarian Calvinism? If infralapsarian Calvinism is "rationally inconsistent" (147), and Molinism holds to unconditional and conditional decrees simultaneously, then would this not also make Molinism rationally inconsistent?

Molinism receives the same charge as infralapsarian Calvinism in Keathley's exegesis on Romans 9. In verses 22 and 23, he examines the two verbs used, *katertismena* (Rom. 9:22) and *proetoimasen* (v. 23). He argues that the verb in verse 22 is a verb in the passive voice, while the verb of verse 23 is in the active voice. For him, this leads to the conclusion that

“God actively elected the saved but passively allows the ruin of the lost” (160). If Molinism argues this, however, how in the biblical text is Molinism distinguishable from infralapsarian Calvinism?

Keathley’s only reply to the distinction of the two theological systems is that “God has actualized a world” in which Israel’s unbelief would amount to a “more glorious salvation for the Church (‘the objects of mercy’)” (160). But is there any biblical evidence that attests to the existence of multiple worlds that God chose from? No. On the surface, then, it seems that if infralapsarian Calvinism and Molinism are placed side-by-side, both can be affirmed based on Keathley’s interpretation of Romans 9. But if infralapsarian Calvinism is inconsistent, then isn’t Molinism infralapsarian Calvinism’s inconsistent twin?

A great contribution of Keathley’s work on middle knowledge is its affirmation of the scriptural basis that humans make contingent choices, leading to human responsibility. However, the problems for Molinism arrive when Keathley discusses divine sovereignty. He argues for “divine selection from multiple worlds,” which can only be inferred from philosophical reasoning. William Lane Craig claims that “it would be difficult to prove in any way [that God possesses middle knowledge] . . . for the biblical passages are not unequivocal” (Craig, *The Only Wise God*, 137). Another weakness in Molinism is that it as a system provides no answer for the problem of evil: “Molinism does not provide an explanation as to why God created a world in which it was possible for sin to enter, but it is not necessary to do so. Molinism is a defense, not a theodicy. A theodicy is an attempt to explain why God ordained the world He did” (163).

The purpose of a theodicy is to diagnose properly the problem of evil and provide a solution. A mechanic cannot repair a vehicle until he properly diagnoses the problem; in the same way, Christians cannot provide a solution to sin and evil until they properly diagnose the problem of sin (origin, etc.). How does sin enter the world? It entered through one man, Adam (Rom. 5: 12). Why does God allow sin to enter the world through humans? Because God is committed to the idea of human dominion over His creation, which He deemed “good” (Gen. 1:26-31). Christians cannot give a proper defense of Christianity if they have no idea why God would allow sin to enter the world. Believers have the responsibility of reasoning with atheists and unbelievers who grapple with the problem of evil. It may require that they grapple with the problem too, but shrugging one’s shoulders and saying “I don’t know” will not suffice.

I highly recommend *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach*. It provides an innovative look into a theological system proposed by Luis de Molina that has been overlooked in academia for too long. However, at the same time, it does have its flaws. There is a reason that Christendom has fought over Calvinism and Arminianism for so long: both are consistent systems (one point logically leads to the next), and both provide eligible answers to the problem of evil. If Molinism desires to compete with these two systems, it will have to become logically consistent and give not just a defense, but a theodicy. Until then, Calvinism and Arminianism will remain the two powerhouses of theological study.