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An Appeal to Mystery Without "Punting": Revisiting Molinism's Biblical Problem in Light of Ephesians 1:4–11 and Romans 11:33–36

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An Appeal to Mystery Without "Punting": Revisiting Molinism's Biblical Problem in Light of Ephesians 1:4–11 and Romans 11:33–36

Abstract

Molinists maintain that middle knowledge is the best candidate for settling the historical debate on God's sovereignty and man's free will. The philosophical sophistication of the view can be alluring, and the efforts of Molinists to rationally defend it against criticisms have been impressive. But does Molinism still have a biblical problem? Proponents argue that the doctrine is compatible with the Bible's teaching on God's knowledge of counterfactuals, though admittedly, it is not explicitly taught in Scripture. But this claim is more problematic than advocates for the theory have alleged. The present study maintains that in the absence of a more complete biblical revelation regarding God's knowledge logically prior to his eternal decree, philosophers of religion should exercise greater caution than is presently being advocated. It is argued that Paul supplies the reader with a necessary constraint to philosophical speculation regarding the deliberations of the divine mind (Rom 11:33–36), and it is John Calvin, not Luis de Molina, who best represents Paul's appeal to mystery in this respect. Far from being an intellectual "punt" to mystery, this is an occasion to join Paul in awestruck wonder in the face of the unknowable.

Jeff Scott Kennedy, Ph.D. Bible Exposition (Rawlings School of Divinity, Liberty University / 2022)

Keywords

Molinism, Middle Knowledge, Natural Knowledge, Free Knowledge, Luis de Molina, Counterfactuals, Subjunctive Conditionals, Foreknowledge, Predestination, Election, Omniscience, Compatibilism, Libertarian Freedom, Calvin

Cover Page Footnote

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“An Appeal to Mystery without ‘Punting’: Revisiting Molinism’s Biblical Problem in Light of Ephesians 1:4–11 and Romans 11:33–36”

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33–36, English Standard Version)

Theologians who decline to speculate on indeterminate matters in biblical texts are sometimes criticized by philosophers of religion as “punting to mystery.” A theological punt can be defined as an appeal to the unknowability of certain ambiguous or paradoxical issues in Scripture so as to avoid the difficult task of philosophical reflection.¹ William Lane Craig observes that all too often, an “easy appeal to mystery has become a substitute for the labor of hard thinking.”² Instead, he insists, Christians should first exhaust their intellectual resources before resorting to mystery as a convenient recourse to ignorance.³ This admonition against lazy or incurious thinking is admirable and, in many cases, necessary. However, some biblical texts may appeal to mystery and even encourage the reader to embrace ambiguities in God. Paul’s ode to God’s omniscience in Romans 11:33–36 is just such a text. Paul’s case for God’s sovereign freedom in election for salvation (Rom 8:28–11:32) crescendos into a hymn that acknowledges the unfathomable depths of God’s knowledge and wisdom while marveling at his inscrutable and unsearchable judgments (Rom 11:33–34).

This study investigates the hymn’s apparent constraining principle as it relates to the philosophical concept of middle knowledge, also referred to as “Molinism.” Molinism theorizes that logically prior to God’s decision to predestine and create the world, God possessed knowledge of all counterfactuals or future contingent truths. On this view, God knows what free creatures would do if created

¹ Timothy A. Stratton, *Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism: A Biblical, Historical, Theological and Philosophical Analysis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 50. Often, the appeal to mystery is described as merely “punting” or deferring to it in the absence of a more complex philosophical explanation. See also Tom McCall and Keith D. Stanglin, “SM Baugh and the meaning of Foreknowledge: Another Look,” *TJ* 26, no.1 (2005): 19–31; For a reformed use of the term, see Oliver D. Crisp, *God, Creation, and Salvation: Studies in Reformed Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 34.

² William Lane Craig, *The Only Wise God: The Compatibility of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 15, 153. Craig is careful to note that mystery has a place, but only as a last resort, after the philosopher has employed the assets of reason and rationality.

³ *Ibid.*

in any set of freedom-permitting circumstances. Consequently, God can predestine and decree the actions of these free creatures according to his will to bring many freely to salvation. This speculative theory concerns God's knowledge of supposed counterfactuals of creaturely choices in order to resolve the debate between Thomistic high sovereignty (predestination) and human free will (libertarian choice). The present study maintains that in the absence of a more complete biblical revelation regarding God's knowledge logically prior to his eternal decree, philosophers of religion should exercise greater caution than is presently being advocated. It is argued that Paul supplies the reader with a necessary constraint to philosophical speculation regarding the deliberations of the divine mind (Rom 11:33–36), and it is John Calvin, not Molina, who best represents Paul's appeal to mystery in this respect. This would mean that the supposed choice between engaging in the rigors of philosophical study or defaulting to a lazy intellectual punt to mystery is a false dilemma in this particular case. Another interpretive live option remains—Paul intended his Roman readers to embrace the unknowability of this issue as a stimulus for greater worship.

The Usefulness and the Challenge of Philosophical Theology

This paper stipulates that the modern theologian is indebted to the rich heritage of Christian philosophical writings.⁴ Considering the pretensions of the so-called enlightenment (1685–1815) and the subsequent eviction of God and

⁴ The anti-philosophical traditions of some patristics (Tertullian, Tatian, Irenaeus, et al.) and certain Reformers (Luther) should not be pressed too much. The issue is not whether they practiced philosophical theology but to what degree. One need only read Luther's debate with Erasmus to see that the thrust of his argument was that embracing "free will" would put Erasmus in conflict with the Anti-Pelagian Constraint (APC), not merely with Paul. See Philip Melancthon, *Loci Communes 1555: Melancthon on Christian Doctrine*, trans. Clyde L. Manschreck, intro. Hans Engelland (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1965), vii–xvi. Despite his official stance of revulsion for "Aristotelian" reasoning, calling it the heathen's "philosophical god," Luther tolerated and enthusiastically endorsed his colleague and successor, Philip Melancthon. An accomplished philosopher and humanist, Melancthon offered rational arguments for God's existence, appealing to reason in his moral philosophy. He published his *Loci Communes* with Luther's apparent consent. See also Aku Visala, "Erasmus Versus Luther: A Contemporary Analysis of the Debate on Free Will," *NJSTh* 62, no.3 (2020): 311–35. Harry A. Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers, Volume I: Faith, Trinity, Incarnation*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956); John Beversluis, "Reforming the 'Reformed' Objection to Natural Theology," *Faith and Philosophy* 12, no. 2 (1995): 189–206; For an explication of Calvin's view, see Paul Helm, "John Calvin, the 'Sensus Divinitatis,' and the Noetic Effects of Sin," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 43, no. 2 (1998): 87–107; For an explanation of Calvin's reception and rejection of certain philosophical ideas, see Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also Calvin's commentary on Acts 17:18–27, where he notes the limited usefulness of philosophical reasoning, Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. 2, trans. Henry Beveridge (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 152.

religious thought from all branches of the humanities, it is therefore encouraging to see a resurgence of the philosophy of religion today. Philosophical theology can be a valuable weapon against “every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God” (2 Cor 10:5). Using God-given reason can help to enlighten the believer’s understanding on matters to which the Bible inconclusively speaks.⁵

This study also acknowledges that Molinism has become an increasingly attractive option because it appears to embrace both a high view of sovereign election and human freedom grounded in a theory of God’s omniscience.⁶ This raises the question of whether every uncertainty in Scripture necessitates a philosophical resolution. Surely some problems are amenable to rational discourse, but perhaps some are not and were intended to be left undisclosed. This issue matters because Molinism is being used to reinterpret the entirety of the *loci communes*, or key aspects of the Christian faith.

Molinism’s Origins

Before critiquing it, the reader must first understand its origins and core concepts. The theory of Molinism gets its name from the Spanish Jesuit priest Luis de Molina (1535–1600).⁷ Following the example of Desiderius Erasmus before him, Molina worked for reform within the Roman Catholic Church, resulting in vicious opposition from the Dominican order.⁸ Kirk MacGregor states, “It should

⁵ Philip J. Fisk, “The Unaccommodated Bavinck and Hodge: Prolegomena with Natural Certainty,” *TJ* 30, no. 1 (2009): 107–27. Despite the tradition of caution or even suspicion regarding philosophical reasoning within some Reformed circles, a cursory reading of Reformed dogmatic texts such as Bavinck, Berkhof, Vos, Hodge, et al. reveals that they are all permeated with philosophical-theological insights for which biblical revelation is only suggestive or evocative. Hodge’s criticisms of Bavinck’s Kampen school of thought is itself reliant on the positivist, law-like principles of exegetical science characterizing the Princetonian method (philosophy). However, the tendency to interpolate a philosophical perspective goes back at least to Calvin himself, exemplified by his *sensus divinitatis* view, which is, philosophically, a substantialist (rather than a vocationalist) perspective on human image-bearing. See Paul Sands, “The Imago Dei as Vocation,” *EvQ* 82, no.1 (2010): 28–41.

⁶ Since Alvin Plantinga’s free will defense in the 1970’s, many have gone on to apply the theory to many areas of theology. See William Lane Craig, “‘No Other Name’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on the Exclusivity of Salvation Through Christ,” *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers* 6, no. 2 (1989): 172–87; Craig, “‘Lest Anyone Shall Fall’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Perseverance and Apostolic Warnings,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29 (1991b): 65–74; Craig, “‘Men Moved by the Holy Spirit Spoke from God’ 2 Pet 1:21: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Biblical Inspiration,” *Philosophia Christi* 1, no. 1 (1999): 45–82.

⁷ Luis de Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), vii.

⁸ Kirk MacGregor, *Luis de Molina: The Life and Theology of the Founder of Middle Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 11.

be emphasized that little in Molina's thought is specifically Roman Catholic in its orientation."⁹ It took Molina thirty years to write his magnum opus, the *Concordia*, and he had to delay its publication for one year because of the stir it caused among classical Thomists who emphasized God's predestination and sovereignty. He finally published the *Concordia* along with an appendix answering anticipated objections to his theory (1588), the addition of which could not assuage his detractors. Afterward, he became the target of withering attacks from the Dominicans, who eventually referred him to the Spanish Inquisition.¹⁰ His ideas were so contentious that Rome had to step in to quash the controversy. Ultimately, they shelved the *Concordia* issuing Molina three censures from the *Congregatio*. Molina went to his grave believing his life's work would be lost in history and that he would be posthumously anathematized.¹¹ A closer examination of his ideas reveals why his theory was so controversial.

Molina's Controversial Idea

Theologians of Molina's day all agreed that God has natural knowledge or innate knowledge. God holds knowledge of all metaphysically necessary truths, including such things as the laws of logic and whatever is true concerning his own nature. Molina states the position well, "Through his natural knowledge, God comprehends himself, and in himself, he comprehends all the things that exist eminently."¹² Not to be mistaken for a sequential progression in God's knowledge, God holds natural knowledge logically or explanatorily prior to his decree of the actual world.¹³ An analogy would be the relationship between axioms and

⁹ MacGregor, *Luis de Molina* 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., 158. It seems clear that Molina's detractors took immediate offense at his suggestion that previous theologians, such as Augustine and Aquinas, had not devoted sufficient thought to the problem of free will and predestination. He claimed that an understanding of middle knowledge would have saved the church hundreds of years of debates beginning with Augustine and Pelagius. This was perceived by the *Congregatio* to be an implicit admission of its novelty and, thus, contrivance.

¹¹ Ibid., 238–41. MacGregor notes that the *Congregatio* met on 169 separate occasions and never found Molina guilty of Pelagianism or Semi-Pelagianism and was deemed not to be heretical. On August 28, 1607, Pope Paul V declared Molinism to be permissible to all who desired to study it.

¹² Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 119.

¹³ For more on the differences between the theory of God as *atemporal* or *omnitemporal*, see William Lane Craig, "Timelessness and Omnitemporality," *Philosophia Christi* 2, no.1 (2000): 29–33. Craig holds that God is timeless *sans creation* but exists temporally after creation. For an alternative Reformed view, see Paul Helm, *Eternal God: A Study of God Without Time*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). For a contra position, see R.T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 150; "The Divine Timemaker," *Philosophia Christi* 22, no. 2 (2020): 211–37.

equations. Arguably, many equations are grounded in certain foundational axioms. Though the axioms are logically prior to equations, they are not temporally or sequentially prior, as the two exist simultaneously. In the same way, as a result of God holding natural knowledge logically prior to the creative decree, God naturally knows what he could do, and therefore he knows all possible worlds that could exist before decreeing any particular world. Medieval theologians believed that this was the first logical moment in God's knowledge.

Likewise, nearly everyone agreed that God holds free knowledge, which was thought to be the second logical moment. God does not create the world out of necessity; he creates it because he freely chooses it. As a consequence of his sovereign decree, God holds knowledge of all truths about the actual world, including past, present, and future facts. This knowledge is logically posterior to his free decree and was widely thought to include all counterfactuals or future contingent truths (hypotheticals). William L. Craig observes:

Catholic theologians of the Dominican order ... maintained that in decreeing that a particular world exist, God also decreed which counterfactual statements are true. Logically prior to the divine decree, there are no counterfactual truths to be known. All God knows at that logical moment are the necessary truths, including all the various possibilities.¹⁴

Molina and the Jesuit Molinists generally accepted these traditional Thomistic categories but theorized that God also possessed middle knowledge (Lat. *scientia media*).¹⁵ They proposed placing God's counterfactual knowledge (knowledge of hypotheticals) between his natural and free knowledge. This would mean that logically prior to his sovereign decree (creation), God's knowledge of these future contingents is independent of his will.¹⁶ By ordaining free creatures in certain circumstances where he knew what they would freely do, as MacGregor notes, God can "bring about his ultimate purposes through free creaturely decisions."¹⁷ The Molinists suggested thinking of God's omniscience in terms of three logical moments rather than the standard view of two moments.¹⁸

¹⁴ William Lane Craig, "God Directs All Things," in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, eds. Stanley N. Gundry, Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 82.

¹⁵ Alvin C. Plantinga, "Which Worlds Could God have Created?" *Journal of Philosophy* 70, no. 17 (1973): 539–52.

¹⁶ Craig, "God Directs All Things," 82.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁸ John D. Laing, "On Parsing the Knowledge and Will of God, or Calvinism and Middle Knowledge in Conversation," *Calvinism and Middle Knowledge: A Conversation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), 187; cf. Craig, 'No Other Name,' 174. Craig affirms that since God is timeless *sans* creation. Thus, whatever God knows he has always known eternally, and there is no "temporal succession" in God's thinking or knowledge. Nonetheless, Craig states, "There does exist a sort of

- **First moment (natural knowledge):** God knows all metaphysically necessary truths and therefore knows what he *could* do and what worlds or states of affairs he could realize.
- **Second moment (middle knowledge):** God knows what *would* happen; he knows the range of feasible worlds that would allow for human free choices.¹⁹ And he knows the choices free creatures would make if he were to realize any state of affairs.
- **God's free choice to decree the actual world:** In a sovereign act, he freely chooses to bring a feasible world into existence and make it actual.
- **Third moment (free knowledge):** God knows what will happen in the world he has freely chosen; he knows all that will unfold in the actual world, both determined things and undetermined things.²⁰

Molina thought this view would solve the ongoing debate on human free will and the double-predestinating will of God.

Molinism's Compatibility with Scripture

Proponents of Molinism have attempted to justify this view biblically, theologically, and philosophically.²¹ The logical coherence of Molinism has been adequately defended, and the philosophical arguments need not be engaged here.²²

logical succession in God's knowledge in that His knowledge of certain propositions is conditionally or explanatorily prior to His knowledge of certain other propositions."

¹⁹ MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 11.

²⁰ Petr Dvorak, "Divine Foreknowledge and Future Contingents and Necessity," in *A Companion to Luis de Molina*, eds. Alexander Aichele and Mathias Kaufmann (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 55–56. Dvorak affirms that divine foreknowledge is essential to God's providence of the world and that all late scholastic movements had shared desiderata: (1) God as the first cause must be the causal impetus for any logically contingent state of affairs, either as a necessary or sufficient cause. (2) God knows the truth of any logically contingent statement, including human free decisions or the results of these. (3) Humans, therefore, have freedom of choice such that their actions are sufficient for moral responsibility. (4) God is in no way the direct cause or source of evil. On Molina's view, Thomism easily explains God's foreknowledge because of causal determinism (1 and 2) but cannot explain free choices and, thus, human responsibility (3 and 4). Molina explicitly denied that God is the sufficient cause, determining human volition. True free choices, he thought, must be out of God's direct control either as the necessary, sufficient, or efficient cause.

²¹ Craig, "God Directs the World," 83. Cf. Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Theism: Omniscience* (Leiden: Brill, 1991), 237–78.

²² Thomas P. Flint, "The Molinist Debate: A Reply to Hasker," in *Molinism: The Contemporary Debate*, ed. Ken Perszyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); William Lane Craig, "Hasker On Divine Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* 67, no. 2 (1992): 89–110; William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, Truth-Makers, and the 'Grounding Objection,'" *Faith and Philosophy* 18, no. 3 (2001):

Instead, this study focuses on the biblical basis and warrant for the view. Molinists often assert that they have thoroughly addressed all objections and advocate for moving forward with the application of middle knowledge across various theological domains.²³ However, this paper serves as a call to pause and revisit the question of whether additional biblical justification is necessary. It seems that any solid biblical case must do more than merely justify Molinism's compatibility with Scripture.²⁴ The view must instead provide sufficient biblical grounds for a strong affirmation of it. Some have tried to put this doctrine in the same category of the Trinity or God's perfections, which require an extrapolation about God from revealed biblical truths.²⁵ But unlike those doctrines, which are the inescapable result of a robust texts-to-theory exegesis, Molinism cannot hold that same distinction as it is firstly a philosophical framework that is brought to various texts in Scripture.²⁶

Old Testament Examples of God's Counterfactual Knowledge

Nevertheless, there are some passages in both the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT) that seem to strongly suggest that God at least knows contingent choices or subjunctive hypotheticals. Craig maintains that "The Scriptures abound with examples of such counterfactual conditionals concerning creaturely choices and actions."²⁷ For instance, Moses warns that if the Israelites

337–52; Craig, "Robert Adams's New Anti-Molinist Argument," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 54, no. 4 (1994): 857–61.

²³ Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence: The Molinist Account* (Ithaca, NY: 1998), 186.

²⁴ Craig, "God Directs All Things," 83–84. Craig states, "Unfortunately, this fact does not settle the matter of whether God has middle knowledge. For the scriptural passages show only that God possesses knowledge of counterfactual propositions." Hence the appeal to philosophy. But, Molinists maintain, this would also apply to other doctrines, such as aseity, divine timelessness vs. omnitemporality, divine simplicity, strong impassability, strong immutability, etc., which are routinely assumed by many Reformed and Catholic theologians.

²⁵ Braxton Hunter and Timothy A. Stratton, "Yes, Molinism is Biblical," August 22, 2022, YouTube interview, 6:46, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LmukhG4f8DU>. On several occasions Stratton has compared Molinism with the doctrine of the Trinity. Others have attempted to actually apply Molinism to the alleged problem of the incarnation, a subject within Trinitarian theology. See Thomas P. Flint, "The Possibilities of Incarnation: Some Radical Molinist Suggestions," *Religious Studies*, 37, no. 3 (2001): 307. For a response, see William Lane Craig, "Flint's Radical Molinist Christology Not Radical Enough," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*, 23, no. 1, (2006): 55–64; R. T. Mullins, "Flint's 'Molinism and the Incarnation' is Too Radical," *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3, (2015): 109–23.

²⁶ See Molina's *Concordia*, 116 for his "proofs" regarding foreknowledge. See Disputation 49. In his exposition of Rom 8:29, he just assumes that God's knowledge must be natural, middle, and free. This perspective is then brought to Rom 8:29 having already assumed that logical moments in God's knowledge are a fact without any critical self-reflection on the matter.

²⁷ Craig, "God Directs All Things," 83.

were to make a covenant with the Canaanites upon entering the land, God would destroy them as a people (Deuteronomy 7:1–5). Israel can choose its consequences. Likewise, according to Nehemiah, their ancestors' disobedience led to judgment because they would not obey God (Nehemiah 9:29–30), suggesting different choices would have resulted in different results. Similarly, Jonah's story demonstrates God's awareness of alternate outcomes, as God's offer of salvation to Nineveh leads to repentance, averting an otherwise sure judgment, "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil way, God relented of the disaster that he had said *he would do to them, and he did not do it*" (Jonah 3:10).²⁸ Molinists note that the expectation of moral compliance through repentance presupposes moral aptitude. These individuals could choose either way, and sometimes they chose obedience, and at other times, they chose the consequences of disobedience.

Perhaps the most well-known example in the OT is David's interaction with the residents of Keilah, a citadel city in the lowlands of Judah. According to 1 Samuel 23, David takes refuge in the city after saving it from the Philistines (1 Sam 23:1–5). Upon discovering Saul's plot to march on Keilah to capture and kill him (1 Sam 23:6–8), David inquires of the priestly Ephod, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" And the LORD responds, "They will surrender you" (23:12). But then they fail to take David. The whole predicament is avoided because David makes a different choice and leaves the town. In this example, God doesn't just know what will happen; he knows what would have happened had David stayed in Keilah.

New Testament Examples of God's Counterfactual Knowledge

There are also several apparent instances of God's hypothetical knowledge of creaturely choices in the New Testament (NT). Molina's principal example in the *Concordia* was of Jesus pronouncing woes upon Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum. Christ denounces them for their apathy and lack of repentance despite witnessing his mighty works, suggesting that if ancient Tyre and Sidon had seen the same miracles, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes (Matthew 11:21). Jesus knows what the residents of Tyre and Sidon would have done had they witnessed his Galilean ministry. In another story, Jesus admonishes the Pharisees for condemning the guiltless disciples who threshed grain in their hands because they were hungry on the Sabbath. Jesus taught that if the Pharisees had grasped the importance of mercy over mere ritual, then they would not have condemned the guiltless disciples (Matthew 12:7). If these religious leaders had understood the importance of human life and that the Sabbath was made to serve man not man to serve the Sabbath, then they would have not chosen to prematurely

²⁸ Emphasis mine.

judge the famished disciples. Finally, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he explains that the rulers of this age would surely not have crucified the Lord of glory had they comprehended the full implications of Christ's victory leading to their demise (1 Corinthians 2:8). The above examples seem compelling: God doesn't only know what a person *will do* as a matter of simple foreknowledge, he knows what a person *would do* if circumstances had been different.

Molinism, Thomism, or Calvinism

These biblical examples notwithstanding, it still remains to be seen what theory best accounts for these apparent counterfactuals in Scripture. Perhaps no theory is needed. Does God comprehend contingent truths as part of his infallible prevolitional knowledge (middle knowledge)? Or does God know these hypotheticals as a consequence of his creational decree of a world of his choosing (Thomism)? A third and apparently simpler interpretive option remains. Instead of speculating about God's state of mind, the Bible presents God's predestination and election of the believer as an eternal plan, and God's knowledge of hypothetical truths is in accordance with his eternal knowledge of that plan and his will (Calvinism).²⁹ In other words, the issue of logical moments in God's knowledge remains intentionally mysterious and thus elusive. This option is admittedly conservative. On this view, foreknowledge is neither prevolitional knowledge of counterfactuals of creaturely freedom nor is it merely God's simple propositional foreknowledge, or prescience of the world after creation, nor some combination of both.³⁰ Instead, God foreknows his people because he wills to choose them and to bestow his covenant love upon them while also knowing which future conditionals are true about them.³¹ Beyond these mere claims, the biblical authors remain silent. Scripture's silence on the matter (mystery) was John Calvin's view.

²⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 377–78. While Calvin and the Westminster Confession tended to speak of God's eternal decree, Erickson instead adopts the language of his eternal "plan," mainly due to his exegesis of Ephesians 1:4–11.

³⁰ Origen, *The Fathers of the Church: Origen: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1–5* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2001), 65–66. Origen curiously asserted something like a middle knowledge view in saying that God knows what people would do, and then chooses them on this basis. But his view turns out to be more akin to Pelagianism.

³¹ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, eds. Robert W. Yarbrough and Joshua W. Jipp, 2nd ed. BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018), 444. Schreiner notes that the "background of the term should be located in the OT, where for God 'to know' (יָדָע, *yāda*) refers to his covenant love, in which he sets his affection on those whom he has chosen (cf. Gen. 18:19; Exod. 33:17; 1 Sam. 2:12; Ps. 18:43; Prov. 9:10; Jer. 1:5; Hosea 13:5; Amos 3:2)."³¹ Romans 11:2 reflects this usage, as the opposite of God "rejecting" (ἀπόστατο) Israel was to "foreknow" (προέγνω) them. This strongly implies more than mere prescience or cognitional foreknowledge.

God's Will: Molina Versus Calvin

A brief comparison between Molina and Calvin seems necessary. The two models will then be applied to Paul according to Ephesians 1:4ff. and Romans 11:33–36 to see who aligns best with the apostle's clear teaching.

Molina's View of God's Will and Election

Molina thought that having knowledge of counterfactuals only by virtue of his free decision to create a world would deprive God (and free creatures) of any real choice.³² Craig explains Molina's view:

He [God] does not possess knowledge at this second moment of such counterfactuals concerning decisions of his own will. Molina believed that such knowledge would rob God of His freedom, presumably because which counterfactuals are true or false does not depend on God's will. Molina supported exempting decisions of God's own will from divine middle knowledge on the basis of his doctrine of supercomprehension.³³

If God does not know counterfactuals to be true in any possible or feasible world, then free creatures would be dispossessed of their free will.³⁴ Molina thought, "[God] comprehended this [all things that were going to freely or contingently happen] not only prior to anything's existing in time but even prior ... to any

³² Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 166. In his sixth argument, he maintains that "foreknowledge of future things destroys freedom of choice" and here he refers to the Thomistic view of God's foreknowledge of all things decreed.

³³ Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge*, 238. Emphasis mine.

³⁴ For an engaging defense of libertarian freedom, see Stratton, *Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism*, 5. Stratton essentially defines libertarian freedom (free will) as "the categorical ability to choose among a range of alternative options, each of which is consistent or compatible with one's nature." While external factors may influence an individual's choice (e.g., place of birth, family history, genetics, etc.) ultimately choices must, by definition be uncoerced or undetermined, otherwise responsibility for those decisions remains impossible. The typical Reformed response is to point to the myriad of metaphors and passages in Scripture which appear to teach that human beings are spiritually blind, dead, and enslaved. The mind is "darkened" such that one's "thinking has become futile" (Rom 1:21–22), we are "dead in our sins" (Rom 6:1; Eph 2:1–11), "were slaves" of sin, having now died to its enslavement (Rom 6:6, 18, 20), now raised and made "alive from the dead" (6:13), and have been *set free for freedom* (Gal 5:1; cf. John 8:36). It seems one should make a distinction then, between the innate capacity for libertarian freedom and the ability to operationalize that freedom given one's corruption in sin.

created thing's existing in the duration of eternity."³⁵ Here, Molina makes a distinction between things existing with their real existence (in the duration of time) and things preexisting with what he calls objective existence within God's knowledge (in the duration of eternity).³⁶ The implication is that natural and middle knowledge are prevolitional and, therefore not decisive nor determinative in God's eternal will or plan.

The key to Molina's view appears to be his understanding of foreknowledge. He observed that Paul and Peter agree that God "foreknew" (*proginōskō*, προγινώσκω) the predestined (Rom 8:29–30; 1 Pet 1:1–2). Aquinas thought this foreknowledge was mere prescience, and Augustine collapsed the idea of foreordination into foreknowledge. Calvin later embraced Augustine's view but found ample biblical support for conflating foreknowledge and foreordination. Molina rejected both of these positions. He rejected the Augustinian view because he believed that such unilateral determination would eliminate the creature's libertarian freedom.³⁷ He observed numerous instances in Scripture where moral choices and moral commands presume that those so commanded have both moral discernment and moral fitness. Additionally, he rejected the Thomistic view as reductionistic to natural knowledge. Molina interpreted Romans 9:11–13 as definitive in this respect. God's election of Jacob over Esau was not based on human will or desire or anything they had done (Rom 9:11–13). He believed that God's choice of circumstances still requires unconditional election.³⁸ Thus, predestination cannot be motivated by God's knowledge of what an individual will do or would do.³⁹ MacGregor explains, "For Molina, therefore, the cause and ground of any person's predestination to salvation (election) or to condemnation (reprobation) is God's sovereign will."⁴⁰ Molina took the aforementioned passages

³⁵ Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 116. See Alfred Freddoso fn 8, See also Molina, *Foreknowledge*, 127. Commenting on Jerome's view of Eph 1:4ff., Molina insists that things that do not yet exist "are not hidden from God, but rather are known clearly by him just as if they existed."

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 185.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁹ Kirk MacGregor, "Luis de Molina's Doctrine of Predestination," *A Paper Delivered at the 67th Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on 17 November 2015*, 2 (2015): 1–8.

⁴⁰ MacGregor, *Luis de Molina*, 26. He cites Molina: "The total effect of predestination...depends only on the free will of God" to which, MacGregor comments, "Any Calvinist would give a hearty 'Amen' to Molina's reasoning from Romans 9:15–18." cf. Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 219. Molina criticizes Luther for his Augustinian view of meticulous predestination, even of sinners and their choices while also criticizing a simple compatibilist view of predestination with permission. He writes that these thinkers "take refuge in the permission of sins and claim that this alone, without any previous middle knowledge, is the reason God's knowledge regarding future sins is certain." See Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 218–19. Disputation 53.9–10.

(Rom 8:29, 1 Pet 1:12) to mean that God's election, while in accordance with his prior counterfactual knowledge, is neither dependent on nor determined by any actual or counterfactual creaturely choices. While God may predestine a world in which he knows which counterfactuals are true, he does not choose a feasible world because those counterfactuals are true.⁴¹

Molina argued that traditional medieval interpretations of Romans 8:29–30 and 1 Peter 1:1–2 mistakenly applied the wrong species of God's knowledge (free knowledge) to the apostolic texts. To him, it was clear that the apostles, in their use of the term προγινώσκω failed to differentiate between the three types of divine knowledge (natural, middle, or free knowledge), leaving the precise referent of these verses ambiguous. He deduced that the proper referent to προγινώσκω must be prevolitional, leaving natural or middle knowledge as the only choices of the three.⁴² He further deduced that if the apostles had meant "natural knowledge" by προγινώσκω, then this would warrant the view of universalism, which the Bible explicitly teaches against. So logically, the only option left as the proper referent of προγινώσκω was middle knowledge. MacGregor affirms that "For Molina himself, at this logical point in God's complete and *unlimited deliberation*, God is faced with an infinite range of feasible worlds."⁴³ Molina insisted, "It has to be explained how future contingents are known by God and how the foreknowledge he has of them coheres with their contingency."⁴⁴ He marshaled multiple philosophical and circumstantial biblical texts in support of his view, attempting to apply the hermeneutical principle of the analogy of Scripture.⁴⁵

The problem with Molina's approach should be apparent. If, by Molina's own admission, Paul and Peter did not convey the nuances between natural, middle, and free knowledge in their use of προγινώσκω, then this is a tacit admission that those authors did not intend to communicate such ideas. MacGregor notes that "Molina believed that the way to reconcile these three sets of texts was not exegetical but philosophical."⁴⁶ To arrive at his peculiar interpretation of προγινώσκω in Paul's or Peter's texts one must first apply the philosophical

⁴¹ Ibid., 150. See also page 30, fn 23. An important distinction must be noted here between epistemic Molinism and soteriological Molinism. In practical terms, Molina's view of predestination and salvation of the elect was very close to Calvin's. Molina and Calvin differed from each other but also significantly from Arminius who thought that after looking down the corridor of history, God merely predestines those he foreknows will freely believe in Christ. But, as Craig has pointed out, Arminius' view really is not predestination at all as there is not much for it do other than to decree what God already knows.

⁴² Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 168; MacGregor, "Luis de Molina's Doctrine of Predestination," 4.

⁴³ Ibid., 6. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 98, 141.

⁴⁶ MacGregor, "Luis de Molina's Doctrine of Predestination," 1.

framework of alleged logical moments in God's knowledge. This preconceived idea is then imported into the passages in question in order to resolve what appears to be an apparent contradiction.⁴⁷ Furthermore, he mostly ignores the Jewish and OT context of Paul and Peter. If the background referent to προγινώσκω is the Hebrew word "to know" *yāda* (יָדָע) then it surely refers to the bestowal of God's covenant love and affection set on his elect people (cf. Gen 18:19; Exod 33:17; 1 Sam 2:12; Ps 18:43; Prov 9:10; Jer 1:5; Hosea 13:5; Amos 3:2).⁴⁸ Schreiner notes that the parallel terms "consecrate" and "appoint" in Jer 1:5 are synonymous with God's foreknowledge of Jeremiah's calling.⁴⁹ When Paul says that God has not rejected the nation he "foreknew," this implies more than mere prior knowledge (Rom 11:2). By Molina's own admission, exegesis of these texts leads to a heuristic dead end hence the need to engage rational arguments. Consequently, Molina's view is not the inevitable result of the exegesis of those "foreknowledge" texts in light of Paul's and Peter's ancestral background. Yet a further, more insuperable problem remains.

Beyond exegesis, one wonders what there is for counterfactual knowledge to do. "Nothing!" Molinists would say. While knowledge may serve as a causal precondition for action, knowledge itself lacks inherent causal properties. If one had definite prior knowledge that the Twin Towers would fall on 9/11, for example, having that foreknowledge would not cause the buildings to fall. The point is well taken. But then, why bother postulating that God has this species of knowledge if nothing is contingent on it or if he makes no decisions in light of it? Again, Molina claimed that Paul's wording "according to foreknowledge" does not necessitate that he means "owing/due to his foreknowledge" but refers only to taking that knowledge into consideration. By his own admission, God does not decree the world based on counterfactuals of creaturely freedom.

Yet another problem remains with respect to God's alleged desire and inner judgment. If God's free decree is grounded by his alleged prevolitional desires in a supposed "unlimited deliberation" informed by middle knowledge, then how can it be said that God's will is not already in motion? Both desire (want) and deliberation (judgment) imply a will that is already at work in the formulation of a plan of action even before that plan is actualized. Craig reflects this very dilemma when he states:

According to Molina, this decision is the result of a complete and *unlimited deliberation* by means of which God considers and weighs every possible

⁴⁷ Molina, *On Divine Foreknowledge*, 116ff; particularly on page 168 in Disputation 52 where Molina insists that "It is necessary for us to distinguish three types of knowledge in God." This "necessary" rational framework must therefore be brought to circumstantial texts.

⁴⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 443.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

circumstance and its ramifications and decides to settle on the particular world He *desires*. Hence, logically prior, if not chronologically prior, to God's creation of the world is the divine deliberation concerning which world to actualize.⁵⁰

It is difficult to see where one should locate this purported desire and unlimited deliberation concerning which world to instantiate. Since desire implies a want and deliberation implies adjudicating between desired options, how can it be said that God desires and considers his options unless his will is already engaged? This would suggest that God's knowledge of counterfactuals is not prevolitional as the Molinist claims. And if that is the case, then there is no need to postulate middle knowledge. To summarize Molina's view and its implications:

- Counterfactuals of creaturely freedom are independent of God's will and, therefore, not within God's control. God's knowledge of counterfactuals is not grounded in the actual world but in his "supercomprehension" of all necessary truths including all possible worlds.
- God holds middle knowledge logically prior to his eternal will, and his divine desire and unlimited deliberation regarding possible worlds are logically prior to the eternal decree.
- God's will to elect is eternal but only in relation to temporal realities (like the world), not atemporal or logical realities, such as God's alleged natural or middle knowledge.
- Molina insisted that God's foreknowledge must not be confused with mere prescience or prior knowledge of the actual world, nor should foreordination be collapsed into foreknowledge. Peter and Paul must have had God's middle knowledge in mind when they taught that God foreknows the predestined.
- God knows counterfactuals about possible worlds before there are any facts about the actual world. God can choose to create a person in one set of circumstances where they would choose the good over evil, or in another set of circumstances where the same person would choose evil over the good, or God can choose not to create them at all. This, for Molina, presupposes that God must know of their possible and contingent choices logically prior to decreeing them into existence.
- God's election of individuals is indirect but definite. He chooses individuals by choosing a world or circumstances out of the ensemble of possible worlds and then by predestinating individuals to inhabit the particular circumstances of their lives.

⁵⁰ Craig, "No Other Name," 178.

- Human beings can resist God's will or embrace God's offer of salvation because they have "libertarian freedom," or libertarian self-determination (what Molina simply called "free will").

It should be noted, however, that once God predestines an actual world, those alleged free creatures do exactly what God knew they would have done and now foreknows what they will do because they are instantiated in the preordained actual world.

Calvin's View of God's Will and Election

By contrast, Calvin seems to reject or ignore both Thomistic and Molinistic categories of knowledge in favor of a more plainspoken doctrine of the eternal decree. The comparison and contrast of their views thus necessarily leaves behind epistemic middle knowledge (God's knowledge state prior to creation) and centers on soteriological Molinism, as Calvin's concern was the latter (soteriology) and not at all the former (epistemology).⁵¹ Several quotes from Calvin should suffice to capture his view and the eternity of God's decreeing will:

"The will of God is the chief and principal cause of all things."⁵²

"By predestination, we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man."⁵³

"God the ruler and governor of all things, who in accordance with his wisdom has from the farthest limit of eternity decreed what he was going to do."⁵⁴

"The foundation and first cause, both of our calling and of all the benefits which we receive from God, is here [Eph 1:4] declared to be his eternal election. If the reason is asked, why God has called us to enjoy the gospel, why he daily bestows upon us so many blessings, why he opens to us the gate of heaven—the answer will be constantly found in this principle,

⁵¹ Which Molina himself was quick to do. In popular debates Molinists often protest the Calvinist's use of Ephesians 1:4–11 or other soteriological passages in an attempt to redirect the conversation back to epistemic middle knowledge. But this just is to privilege the philosophical epistemology over biblical soteriology. In a biblical discussion on the issue, one can only examine the texts that speak to God's knowledge, will, and choice. And the overwhelming contexts in Scripture are soteriological.

⁵² John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, 177.

⁵³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 206.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 28. See 1.16.8.

that he hath chosen us before the foundation of the world. The very time when the election took place proves it to be free; for what could we have deserved, or what merit did we possess, before the world was made?"⁵⁵
"Had not God, through his own election, rescued us from perishing, there was nothing to be foreseen."⁵⁶

This approach is strikingly conservative and straightforward by comparison.⁵⁷ But Calvin is also careful to note that God's eternal decree is not a decree of necessity (and thus fatalistic) but of his free choice.

Did Calvin Prefer Causal Determinism Over an Appeal to Mystery?

The claim at the outset by some philosophers of religion has been that if one chooses to reject speculative philosophy on God's knowledge and predestination (Molinism), then only two choices remain: (1) The interpreter can embrace a causally determined world in which human decision-making is illusory or a farce (allegedly Calvinism). (2) Or, in the absence of a good philosophical explanation, one can "punt to mystery" defaulting to intellectual indifference on the issue.⁵⁸ But this is a false option, both as it applies to Calvin and those who agree with his interpretation of Paul. A survey of Calvin reveals that his view of predestination and human choice is in no way allergic to the notion of an appeal to mystery, either in terms of God's reasons for foreordination or the interplay between the foreordained and their choices. He defines "mystery" as that which is "incomprehensible until the time of its revelation."⁵⁹ He describes the relationship between God's sovereign choice and human decisions as a "high mystery" (9:14), an "incomparable mystery" (9:16), an "inexplicable mystery" (9:22), an "incomprehensible mystery" (11:25), and a "great mystery" so profound that mankind's deepest reasoning cannot breach it nor penetrate it (11:33).⁶⁰ Calvin concludes:

Thus, the more he [Paul] elevates the height of the divine mystery, the more he deters us from the curiosity of investigating it. Let us then learn to make no searchings respecting the Lord, except as far as he has revealed himself

⁵⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 197–98.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 198.

⁵⁷ Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

⁵⁸ Stratton, *Human Freedom, Divine Knowledge, and Mere Molinism*, 50.

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Romans*, 435.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 359. On Paul's example of the hardening of Pharaoh's heart (9:17), Calvin states that the reasons for hardening Pharaoh must remain hidden in the private undisclosed counsel of God's mind.

in the Scriptures; for otherwise we shall enter a labyrinth, from which the retreat is not easy. It must, however, be noticed that he speaks not here of all God's mysteries but of those which are hid with God himself and ought to be only admired and adored by us.⁶¹

The inner workings of God's mind are unknowable. Calvin appealed to a doctrine of mystery with respect to God's omniscience and foreordination. To summarize his view in contrast to Molina's:

- Whereas Molina believed that God's knowledge of creaturely choices was not dependent on God's will, Calvin taught that nothing is independent of or outside the control of God's sovereign and eternal decree. For "In him we live and move and have our being" and that includes human choices.
- Contrasted to Molina's view of an eternal will only relative to temporal realities, Calvin taught God's will to elect is an eternal decree beyond which the believer can say nothing. Since neither Paul nor Peter reveals how this works in the mind of God by logical moments in his knowledge, all theories should refrain from prying into the divine mind.
- Therefore, God's foreknowledge of future contingent truths is grounded in God's sovereign and eternal decree to relationally and covenantally know the elect in particular. This, Calvin insisted, is the cultural referent for προγινώσκω, "foreknowledge."
- Contrary to Molina's idea of God electing individuals by choosing a "feasible world" or "circumstances," Calvin taught that God's election is discreet and personal. He has predestined his people, the individuals who comprise the group. It is on them that his affection is set and his favor conferred from eternity past.
- Consequently, human beings cannot resist God's sovereign decree, his will, and his purpose. While God is the remote cause of all their choices, the individual is the proximate cause of their sinful decisions, meaning they remain responsible and accountable to God for their choices.

Now it remains to be seen which view appears more consistent with Paul's claims in his letters to the Ephesians and the Romans and which view is the more extravagant.⁶²

⁶¹ Ibid., 445.

⁶² See John D. Laing, "The Compatibility of Calvinism and Middle Knowledge," *JETS* 47, no. 3 (2004): 455–67.

Ephesians 1:4–11: Does God Elect a “World” or “People”?

Paul erupts with praise in his letter to the Ephesians (1:4–11) because “he [God] chose us (ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς) in him before the foundation of the world (πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου)” (Eph 1:4).⁶³ Paul does not here say that he chose a possible world or a feasible world, but “he chose us in Christ” before the creation of this actual world. Later to the Galatians, Paul will personalize that: “Christ loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

A quick survey of the passage draws attention to Paul’s emphasis on God’s plan, pleasure, and will with respect to the elect. God has **predestined us** (Gk. προορίσας ἡμᾶς) for “adoption as sons” (Eph 1:5). This predestination is “according to the **good pleasure** (εὐδοκίαν) of **his will** (τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ)” (1:5b) and is “to the praise of **his glorious grace** (δόξης τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ)” (1:6). This, Paul explains, is a gift that has been “lavished upon us with all wisdom and insight, making known to us the mystery of **his will** (τοῦ θελήματος), according to **his good pleasure/purpose** (εὐδοκίαν αὐτοῦ), which he set forth in him as a **prior plan** (προέθετο ἐν αὐτῷ) for the fullness of time...” (1:8–10). In Christ believers have obtained an inheritance, “having been **predestined** (ἐκκληρώθημεν προορισθέντες) according to the **purpose** (πρόθεσιν) of him who works **all things** (πάντα) according to the **counsel of his will** (βουλὴν τοῦ θελήματος αὐτοῦ)” (1:11).⁶⁴

⁶³ All Greek citations from Michael W. Holmes, *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press SBL, 2011–2013) unless otherwise noted. The phrase πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου is used several times in the NT and also in Second Temple Jewish literature to mean “before creation” or “before the universe began.” Jesus used the phrase this way (Matt 13:35; 25:34; cf. Luke 11:50). His claim that the Father loved him “before the foundation of the world” is most often taken as evidence of his preincarnate and eternal existence (John 17:24), foreknowledge in this context also communicates the Father’s love for the Son. Peter clearly states that Christ was known by the Father “before the foundation of the world” (1 Pet 1:20); Paul’s preference for the phrase πρὸ τῶν αἰώνων “predestined before the ages” likely has the same essential force. Revelation 13:9 states that “everyone whose name was written from the foundation of the world.” Beale states, “It is a metaphor for saints whose salvation has been determined: their names have been entered into the census book of the eternal new Jerusalem before history began, which is explicitly affirmed in 21:27...13:8 and 17:8, which express the notion of predetermination with ‘from the foundation of the world.’ That saints were written in the book before history began is implied by the fact that the beast worshipers are said not to have been so written.” G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text, NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 701–02. For use in the Second Temple Jewish literature, see As. Mos. 1:14; Jos. Asen. 8.9; Midr. Ps. 74:1; 93:3; Gen. Rab. 1:5; For Patristics, see Justin Martyr (AD 100–165) and Irenaeus (AD 135–203) who largely affirmed both the meticulous predestination of God and human freedom of choice; Augustine (AD 354–430) held two different views when comparing the early and late writings.

⁶⁴ See Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, WBC vol. 42 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 22–23. Emphasis mine.

Like a drumbeat, there are several explicit and repeated claims in this text, some ideas aligning with and others contradicting Molina's view:

1. Paul says that God has revealed the mystery (μυστήριον, 1:9) of his will which is the previously unmanifested private counsel of God. This mystery is the revelation of God in Christ.⁶⁵
2. God's choice, and thus his knowledge of the believer, is in Christ before creation began (1:4). Paul clearly sets God's deliberation and desire for a world in the category of his volition or will, not in the category of prevolitional hypothetical knowledge (contra Molinism). This predestination is said to be according to his "purpose," "plan," "good pleasure" (desire), and the "counsel of his will" (his internal deliberation). The reader learns that this is God's "eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:11). Elsewhere, Paul insists that salvation is according to God's own "purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began" (2 Tim 1:9). Paul imparted secret wisdom (the gospel) hidden in God's knowledge to the Corinthians "which God decreed before the ages for our glory" (1 Cor 2:7). This is an eternal decree that is grounded in the sovereign will of God to choose and to know believers. God's pleasure implies his desire (what he wants), and plan/purpose entails his premeditative internal deliberation (adjudicating between desired options).
3. Multiple times he appeals to God's predestination of "us," which includes "we who are first" and "you also" (1:12), and presumably includes Paul as an individual (cf. Gal 2:20; Acts 15:7; Rom 9:24a). Rather than choosing a feasible world, God elects his beloved.
4. Paul says that God "works all things" according to the counsel of his eternal will. This echoes Romans 8:28, in which God works "all things" together for the good of the elect because he has foreknown them in eternity past, and they are "called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28b).⁶⁶ God's predestinating plan seems all-encompassing and leads inexorably to the glorification of the elect whom he foreknew because he chose them before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4).

⁶⁵ Cf. Mark 4:11; Matt 13:11; Luke 8:10. For Paul see Rom 11:25; 1 Cor 15:51; Col 1:26; 2:2; 1 Cor 2:1; 1 Cor 4:1. Paul ironically chides the Corinthians with the exaggerated example of one who "knew all mysteries" (1 Cor 13:2), which sarcastically infers that God has in fact not revealed all mysteries.

⁶⁶ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 23.

5. Paul mentions nothing about God's desire to "receive the freely given love of free creatures," as some Molinists have claimed.⁶⁷ Instead, God's purpose in election is so that all things may be "to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:14). In bestowing his covenant love on his people, those chosen before creation now offer resounding praises for his offer of pure grace (Eph 1:6). This echoes the concluding benediction of Romans 11:36, "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever."

In summary, Paul insists that God's predestinating decree is a direct result of his will (his sovereign choice), obviously making no reference to any logical moments in God's knowledge. It is admittedly difficult to see where middle knowledge fits here unless one assumes that by "foreknowledge" Paul (Rom 8:29) and Peter (1 Pet 1:1–2) meant "prevolitional middle knowledge."⁶⁸ This middle/foreknowledge must be logically before God's choice of the elect "before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4). But this idea seems foreign to the Hebrew apostles' thought-world.

Summary of Ephesians 1:4–11

Two conclusions must be made. First, in the very text where one would expect middle knowledge to be, it is conspicuous by its absence. Since middle knowledge is a theory about God's unlimited prevolitional deliberation concerning possible worlds, and since Paul clearly puts God's deliberative process in the category of his volitional actions in election, this would seem problematic for the theory of middle knowledge. Second, one cannot get middle knowledge out of the Ephesian text unless it is first imported there. This can be achieved through two distinct approaches: hermeneutically, employing the analogy of Scripture to interpret related texts that perhaps align with the present one, or alternatively, via eisegesis, which entails introducing foreign concepts from external contexts unknown to the author and unrelated to the writer's intended insights.

As Molina himself acknowledged, his interpretation of the Ephesian text requires the incorporation of a foreign concept derived from Thomistic "logical moments" within God's knowledge, a concept nowhere present in the writings or

⁶⁷ William Lane Craig, "Theistic Critiques of Atheism." *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 69–85. This claim is found nowhere in Scripture, but it has proven to be an effective rejoinder to Atheist criticisms of God's existence due to the problem of evil and suffering in the world.

⁶⁸ Lincoln, *Ephesians*, 23.

the thought-world of Paul and Peter.⁶⁹ Paul apparently knew nothing of medieval categories of God's knowledge and makes no appeal to it as the basis for election. Thus, Molinism is eisegetical. Calvin's view, on the other hand, which is free of speculation about the mental state of God prior to his eternal decree, seems to best align with Paul. Calvin embraces God's eternal will and decree as a boundary event for human knowledge. He explains:

The subject of predestination, which is difficult enough already, is made even more puzzling and dangerous by human curiosity. This [curiosity] cannot be held back from forbidden areas, even floating up to the clouds in a determination to discover all the secret things of God. When we see decent men rushing into such presumption, we must point out how wrong it is. First, when they delve into the question ... they must remember that they are probing the depths of divine wisdom, and if they dash ahead too boldly, then instead of satisfying their curiosity, they will enter a maze with no exit! It is not right that men should pry into things which the Lord has chosen to conceal in himself ... The secrets of his will, which he sees fit to make plain, are revealed in his Word: everything necessary for our well-being is there.⁷⁰

For Calvin, God's revelation in Scripture was not given so that the philosopher of religion could be endlessly exercised through speculation about God's inner mental life. Again, he states, "If anyone will seek to know more than what God has revealed, he shall be overwhelmed with the immeasurable brightness of inaccessible light."⁷¹ God's revelation was intended to conform the Christian to the image of his Son as the believer gazes in wonder, at times into the unknowable. The Molinist, conversely, rejects that limitation either philosophically or exegetically.

How Has God Imprisoned All That He Might Show Mercy to All?

The study now comes to Paul's ode to God's omniscience in Romans 11:33–36 to understand its bearing on Molinist claims. Paul concludes, "For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all" (Rom 11:32). This summary statement encapsulates the theme of God's sovereign election in

⁶⁹ Molina, *Concordia*, 7.23. cf. MacGregor, "Luis de Molina's Doctrine of Predestination," 3–4.

⁷⁰ Calvin, *Institutes*, 214.

⁷¹ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 447.

Romans 9:1–11:32.⁷² God works all things together for the good of his Spirit-filled people (Rom 8:28) who are assured that nothing can separate them from the love of God in Christ (8:31–39).⁷³ In light of this lofty promise, he then grapples with the curious case of Israel, abundantly blessed with the covenants, prophets, and the Messiah, yet they remain currently “cut off” and not saved (Romans 9:3, 10:1). Paul explains that Israel’s partial hardening is part of God’s eschatological plan to extend salvation to the Gentiles, ultimately leading to the inclusion of a remnant of ethnic Jews into Christ (Romans 11). Israel is cut off from the vine with hardened hearts due to their unbelief and God’s sovereign will. Paul elaborates on both paradoxical claims across three sections.

First Section (Rom 9:1–29): God’s Plan for Israel Did not Fail

The reason that God’s plan cannot be considered a failure (9:6) is that God had always intended to save a remnant from among the larger groups, “For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring” (9:6b–7a). Paul insists that “it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring” (9:8). He notes that many Jews are presently excluded from the blessings of salvation due to God’s sovereign choice and their persistence in unbelief.⁷⁴ In Paul’s theology, the sovereign election of God is compatible with human choices and responsibility. He then proceeds to give several examples in support of this:

Example 1: God’s sovereign choice of Isaac over Ishmael (9:6b–13; presupposes God’s choice of Abraham over Nahor, cf. v. 7).

⁷² Schreiner, *Romans*, 612. Schreiner states, “Verse 32 sums up the discussion of chapter 11 and of 9–11 as a whole.”

⁷³ Scholars have taken several approaches to Romans 9–11. See Mary Ann Getty, “Paul and the Salvation of Israel: A Perspective on Romans 9–11,” *CBQ* 50, no. 3 (1988) 468; Bruce W. Longenecker, “Different Answers to Different Issues: Israel, the Gentiles and Salvation History in Romans 9–11,” *JSNT* 11, no. 36 (1989): 95; Moo suggests that the central thought is “Salvation is to be found in Jesus alone, for both gentiles and Jews.” See Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, *EBS* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 130. Colin Kruse and Tom Schreiner seem to have it just right. See Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, ed. D. A. Carson, *PNTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012); Schreiner, *Romans*, 22–23.

⁷⁴ Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 355.

Example 2: The choice of Jacob over Esau (vv. 10–13). In order to drive home his point, he cites a difficult passage from Malachi, “Jacob I loved but Esau I hated” (v.13, cf. Mal 1:2–3).⁷⁵

Example 3: The choice of Moses over Pharaoh, showing mercy to Moses but hardening Pharaoh (9:14–18).⁷⁶

Example 4: The Potter’s freedom to make what he wants out of the lumps of clay (9:19–21). He describes all this as not because of works or the desire of man but because of “him who calls” (ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦντος, 9:11b).

Paul then anticipates two objections to his theology of God’s sovereign election:

Objection 1: This makes God the author of sin. Doesn’t God’s choice to show mercy to some and harden or reject others mean that there is “unrighteousness (ἀδικία) in God” (9:14)? In other words, this would make God the author of sin or, worse, a sinner himself.⁷⁷ Paul insists, “By no means!” and then continues to press his point—God can show mercy to whomever he so chooses because he does not owe anyone grace in the first place and can reject others for reprobation for reasons known only to him (9:15–18). Thus, no one can gainsay his free offer because “who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid” (11:35). But if Paul is right about this, it would lead to an additional problem.

Objection 2: God is unjust. Paul projects a question into the mouths of his imaginary interlocutors, “You will say, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’” (9:19) In other words, human beings cannot be held responsible for their actions if they cannot escape the inevitable. How is it just and good that he judges people who cannot resist his predestinating will? Paul’s response, “But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?” In other words, the question itself (much

⁷⁵ It should be noted that the context of Malachi 1 is “Esau” as the archetype of his descendants “Edom” who have historically opposed Israel in the land, going all the way back to Moses’ day.

⁷⁶ It is clear in the context of Pharaoh’s story that God hardened his heart (Exod 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8) through Pharaoh’s own will to harden his own heart (Exod 8:15; 9:12; 9:34). That is, Pharaoh’s will to resist God is the very instrument through which God made him increasingly recalcitrant so that his rejection of God (and Moses) would lead to greater glory and victory for YHWH.

⁷⁷ Guillaume Bignon, *Excusing Sinners and Blaming God: A Calvinist Assessment of Determinism, Moral Responsibility, and Divine Involvement in Evil* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018), 184–89. He notes that Calvin argued that God is the “remote” cause while the individual is the “proximate” cause of sin. In earlier chapters of *Excusing Sinners*, Bignon establishes that in “this world, instances of causal responsibility without moral responsibility were found in all sort of situations,” and these include cases of “coercion, manipulation, mental illness, ignorance of the relevant facts, all these conditions were seen to entail ... that a person, though causally responsible for his actions, is not morally responsible.” These examples illustrate how God can be the predestinating cause and not be the direct cause of their choices.

less the answer) is above everyone's pay grade with the exception of God. Earth-bound observers are simply not in a position to dispute God's actions or will on this matter. Such election may seem unreasonable or morally inexcusable to finite creatures. But God is nevertheless justified because he is the decisive arbiter of what is just and unjust. He alone is in a position to make these decisions and reveal or not reveal his reasoning for it. Paul suggests that to contradict God's wisdom on this matter is to find oneself on a dangerous footing. The reader who echoes the aforementioned objections (9:14, 19) is not here complaining to Calvin but will find himself in conflict with Paul.

After answering these predictable objections, Paul then puts several questions to them. What if God's purpose in displaying his wrath was to demonstrate his power to save his elect people (9:22a)? What if God patiently tolerated the vessels made for his wrath whom he prepared for destruction before creation (9:22b)? And what if God was willing to reveal the riches of his glory on the objects of mercy (the former objects of his wrath now elect) that he prepared beforehand (9:23a)? This series of interrogatives clarifies his previous examples of elect individuals. If God chose to raise up an object of wrath whom he prepared before creation, then that is his prerogative. If God chose to then show those same vessels of wrath his kindness and grace, then that too is his business. He alone is in a position to make those choices.

The reader should note the recurrent theme—the vessels made for destruction/wrath and the objects of mercy were both prepared beforehand. The objects of his mercy are, “Even us,” Paul says, “whom he has also called, not only from among the Jews but from among the Gentiles” (9:24).⁷⁸ The selection of a people from among these larger groups (Jew and Gentile) begins a narrowing of God's election to the remnant cited from several OT texts (Rom 9:25–26; (cf. Hos 2:23; 1:10; Isa 1:9; 10:22–23; 28:22)).⁷⁹ The chapter begins with the election of the nation of Israel (9:1–4), then digresses to the election of individual patriarchs and Pharaoh (9:6–18), then projects forward to the remnant at present within those groups (9:19–29), and finally focuses on individuals among the Gentiles who obtain righteousness “by faith” (9:30–10:10).

In summary, God's plan with ethnic and national Israel did not fail because their choice to reject the Messiah is part of that predestinating plan, and Paul

⁷⁸ Holmes, *Greek New Testament SBL*, Ro 9:24. This is a direct translation of οὓς καὶ ἐκάλεσεν ἡμᾶς οὐ μόνον ἐξ Ἰουδαίων ἀλλὰ καὶ ἐξ ἐθνῶν.

⁷⁹ *HALOT*, s.v. תִּרְשֻׁמָּה, 1380. The Hebrew word תִּרְשֻׁמָּה literally means “residue” or “remainder.” The Greek is λείμμα, which has the same force of meaning. In 2nd Temple literature, this term is used in a multivalent way, referring to groups within larger groups, such as descendants of certain tribes (Jub. 22.21) or referring to the individuals who comprise a group (Jub. 20.7; 21.25; Liv. Pro. Hab. 12.4; 1 En. 83:8; 4 Ezra 12:34; 2 Bar. 40:2; Sib. Or. 5.384) or even individuals as the group, e.g., “Noah the remnant” and by extension his sons (1 En. 106.18–19); Apoc. Zeph. IV.12; also, as a metaphor of “fruit-bearing trees” among the “seed” of Noah Apoc. Adam 6.1.

supplies the reader with no answer as to the interplay between God's sovereign action and human choices.

Second Section (9:30–10:21): Israelites are Called to Confess Jesus as Lord

In Chapter 10, Paul trains his focus on the individual. He contends that unbelieving Israel rejects Christ and instead seeks righteousness through law-keeping, remaining ignorant of God's righteousness (Romans 10:1–3). The individual must hear and choose to respond, "For with the heart *one* believes and is justified, and with the mouth, *one* confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, 'Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame'"⁸⁰ (10:10–11). God's election of Gentiles who confess Christ as Lord (Romans 10:8–10) was divinely intended to provoke Israel to jealousy (Romans 10:19; 11:11), so that God would be found by those who were not seeking him (Romans 10:20).⁸¹ Paul concludes that Israelites who reject the message that has been heard in the prophets and heralded by their preachers (10:18–21) will be answerable for their disobedience and willful defiance of the gospel.

Third Section (11:1–36): Israel is Not Completely Rejected

Yet, God has sovereignly hardened unbelieving Israel, chosen a remnant in grace not on the basis of works (11:1–6), and grafted believing Gentiles into God's family (Rom 11:11–24). Only the "elect" find what they were looking for (righteousness) while "the rest were hardened" by God (11:7) with a "spirit of stupor" and "eyes that would not see" (11:8), and "darkened eyes unable to see or understand" (11:10; cf. 1:19, 21, 28, 31).⁸² The reader should note the connection between the phrases, "eyes that would not see," which has to do with their unbelief—and eyes that "unable to see or understand," stressing God's role in their recalcitrance. Like Pharaoh's example in 9:17, Israel's own intractability is the very means by which God has sovereignly hardened their consciences. While individual ethnic Jews have not been rejected, the nation at large has been judged, even though "their rejection means the reconciliation of the world" (11:15; cf. 11:1).

⁸⁰ Emphasis mine.

⁸¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 532. Regarding the debate on whether Paul here means "temporal end" or "goal," Schreiner states, "I conclude that an either-or is not necessary in Rom. 10:4, and thus both "end" and "goal" are probably intended."

⁸² John Calvin and John Owen, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010), 416–17. Calvin seems to introduce the idea of "permission" in God's sovereign choice stating, "As the elect alone are delivered by God's grace from destruction, so all who are *not elected* must necessarily *remain blinded*. For what Paul means with regard to the reprobate is,—that the beginning of their ruin and condemnation is from this—that *they are forsaken* by God." Emphasis mine.

Though they have been “broken off” and “not spared,” despite their ethnic heritage (11:19, 20; cf. 9:3), they may be grafted back into Christ “if they do not continue in unbelief” (11:23). Paul repeatedly balances God’s sovereign actions with the need for human responsibility without offering an explanation as to how those two things work together.

Paul summarizes that the Romans are now informed about this profound “mystery” of Israel’s “partial hardening” (Rom 11:25). In other words, this is the extent to which God has revealed this mystery. The Jews’ unbelief for the benefit of the Gentile believer is because “God has consigned (συγκλείω, “imprisoned”)⁸³ all to disobedience so that he may have mercy on all” (Rom 11:32; cf. Gal 3:22).⁸⁴ This summary statement encapsulates his entire case for election by God’s grace alone. He has imprisoned all that he might display his immeasurable and undeserved grace to all. The magnitude of this revelation suddenly arrests Paul. He concludes with a doxology to the omniscient God:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge (σοφίας καὶ γνώσεως) of God! How unsearchable (ἀνεξεραύνητος)⁸⁵ are his judgments (τὰ κρίματα)⁸⁶ and how inscrutable (ἀνεξιχνίαστος)⁸⁷ his ways (αἱ ὁδοί)!⁸⁸ “For who has known the mind of the Lord (νοῦν κυρίου),⁸⁹ or who has been

⁸³ BDAG, s.v. συγκλείω, 952. The word means to “put under a compulsion” or to “confine”—to be “locked in under the power of sin.” See Gal 3:22: “But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.” In the LXX, see Exod 14:3; Josh 6:1; 1 Macc 5:5; 6:18.

⁸⁴ Schreiner, *Romans*, 612.

⁸⁵ BDAG, s.v. ἀνεξεραύνητος, 77. Meaning “unfathomable” or “indiscernible.”

⁸⁶ Ibid., κρίματα, 567. This word means “content of a deliberative process, decision, a decree.” The idea of “good judgment and knowledge” or “wisdom and knowledge” is most often paired in the wisdom literature. See Prov 1:7; 2:6, 10; 8:12; 9:10; 14:6; 30:3; Ecc 1:16, 18; 2:21, 26; 7:12; 9:10, 11. In the prophets, the “Spirit of wisdom and knowledge” will rest on the Messiah (Isa 11:2; 33:6). God’s knowledge, wisdom, judgment, and his ways are all taken as corollaries here and should not be pressed for much differentiation.

⁸⁷ Ibid., ἀνεξιχνίαστος, 77. Meaning, “incomprehensible” or “fathomless.”

⁸⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 617. He states, “God’s wisdom and ways are inaccessible to human beings, apart from revelation.” See BDAG, s.v. ὁδός, 691. Here, this word could mean “a way of life; conduct.” Or more probably, “a moral and spiritual viewpoint, way of acting.” It is the way in its most comprehensive sense. BDAG places Rom 11:33 in the former, but it should be placed in the latter as Paul seems to be stepping back and taking in the entirety of God’s redemptive plan.

⁸⁹ See Isa 40:13, Paul cites as his evidence of his exultation. No one knows the mind of God on these matters, apart from revelation and no one serves as God’s counselor on how he should conduct himself or dispense his judgments in salvation history. See BDAG, s.v. νοῦς, 680. The word can, in some instances, refer to the result of thinking, such as an opinion or a decree. But normally refers to “the faculty of intellectual perception; mind, intellect, understanding; the faculty of thinking.” This verse summarizes all the ideas in v. 33. No one could naturally know the mind of the Lord, including his fathomless judgments or ways, the unsearchable depths of the riches of his wisdom and knowledge.

his counselor?” “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. (Rom 11:33–36, ESV)

The hymn celebrates three things: What God has revealed (v. 33a; the mystery of the gospel to the Jews and Gentiles); what God has not revealed (v. 33b–34a; his judgments, his ways, and his mind); and God’s free grace (v. 35)—God owes no one salvation, and so his choice is utterly unmerited.

What God Has Revealed

Only here and in Ephesians 3:8 does Paul use the phrase “fathomless riches,” and in both places, the phrase is linked to God’s unmerited grace in the gospel.⁹⁰ For Paul, “Christ is God’s hidden wisdom” (1 Cor 1:24, 30; 2:6–7), and he is God’s mystery “hidden in the ages and generations but now revealed to his saints” (Col 1:26). In Christ and his gospel are “hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:2–3). God has revealed these treasures to believers so that the church might proclaim the manifold wisdom of God to spiritual forces in heavenly realms (Eph 3:10) in order to free Gentile nations from their enslavement to tyrannical false gods. Paul is simply overcome with wonder and awe at the fact that God’s mysteries, which were despairingly hidden from mankind in ages past, have now been gloriously revealed in Christ to the Church. No one could have fathomed so great a mystery apart from special revelation. But, Paul insists, we have that revelation—it is the mystery revealed in Christ and his work.

What God Has Not Revealed

Concerning that which remains undisclosed, Paul tells the Romans that God’s judgments and ways or deliberations are unfathomable and indiscernible and that no one knows God’s mind (v. 34). He cites Isa 40:13 (LXX), “For who has known the mind of the Lord?” and “who has been his counselor?” Paul quotes this text in only one other place—1 Corinthians 2:16, and there he applies it to unbelievers, “For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But Paul says, “We [believers] have the mind of Christ.” In context, the mind of Christ must refer to the mysteries of God’s wisdom hidden in ages past now revealed in “the word of the cross” (1 Cor 1:18) and by the Spirit who knows and now discloses the mind of God (1 Cor 1:18–2:7). Without the revelation of the gospel in the preaching of the cross and the Spirit’s work to enlighten the darkened mind, the Corinthians could not possibly have discovered God’s salvation on their own.

⁹⁰ Kruse, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans*, 457.

There are yet unfathomable mysteries hidden from both Christians and non-Christians. This should bring believers to their knees in worship because God has chosen to reveal the gospel, his eternal plan and purpose for Jews and Gentiles while also hiding the inner workings of his mind. This, too, is cause for high praise.

It is exactly at this point that Molinist philosophers propose to reveal the cipher key to understanding God's mind on this matter. Through exceptionally sophisticated reasoning, they graciously offer to pull back the curtain revealing the deliverances of the divine mind in order to understand God's ways and his judgments, which Paul says are indiscernible, untraceable, and unknowable apart from revelation (Rom 11:33b).

Conclusion

Based on passages such as Ephesians 1:4–11, Romans 9–11, and Molinism's persisting hermeneutical problem, the following must be concluded: (1) The Bible does not explicitly teach middle knowledge. The usual passages employed to support it neither forbid nor compel one to affirm a middle knowledge view of hypothetical statements in Scripture.⁹¹ (2) Molina's insistence that the phrase "according to foreknowledge" (προγινώσκω Rom 8:29) should be understood as referring to prevolitional middle knowledge lacks support from the immediate, literary, or cultural contexts of Paul. This medieval theory cannot be easily smuggled into the apostle's Jewish way of thinking. Conversely, Calvin's view of foreknowledge has ample support in Paul's ancestral contexts where προγινώσκω or its corresponding Hebrew terms refer to a choice or bestowal of covenant love. God's foreknowledge of the elect entails his choice of them. (3) Calvin and Molina's interpretations of Ephesians 1:4–11 are strikingly similar regarding predestination, with at least one sharp distinction. Molina placed God's desire for a possible world and his unlimited deliberation between world options as part of God's prevolitional knowledge, logically prior to his eternal decree. However, Paul (Eph 1:4ff.) places God's desire/good pleasure and judgment squarely in the category of the counsel of his will simultaneous to the eternal decree. Moreover, as noted, he describes God's ways and deliberations as inscrutable and indiscernible apart from revelation (Rom 11:33–34). Calvin's exposition exemplifies the conservative claims of Paul. (4) Because Molina's view of προγινώσκω cannot be exegeted from Paul's use of "foreknowledge" (Rom 8:29), it seems to fail to adequately explain Paul's "imprisonment to sin" language with regard to human choices (Rom 9–11). Molina's proposal reaches beyond the apostolic authors. Paul's point is that all people are under the bondage of sin (Rom 3:9; 7:14), enslaved to sinful desires (Rom 6:17–20; 7:14), dead to sin (Rom 5:12;

⁹¹ Craig, "God Directs All Things," 83–84.

Eph 2:1–11) and that God has imprisoned all to disobedience in order to have mercy on all (11:32; Gal 3:22–23). Paul tells the Romans that this was God’s plan all along with no appeal to prevolitional knowledge and no accounting of human will. (5) Paul refrains from entertaining yet another objection and is instead awestruck and overwhelmed by the unsearchable knowledge and wisdom of God (Romans 11:33–36). Far from being a “punt to mystery” in the absence of a more sophisticated explanation of God’s sovereignty and man’s choice, Paul intends believers to take this hymn as a constraint against making extravagant claims about the inner workings of the mind of God.

And perhaps this is the “bur in the saddle” for those scholars in the biblical-theological disciplines. Maybe the NT authors did not always think they were leaving the church problems to solve but rather mysteries to inspire awe and wonder before their unknowability. Molinism is undoubtedly a rich philosophical idea that has attracted many today. As its popularity grows, it is likely to attract more individuals due to its pretensions of sophistication. However, middle knowledge has the distinction of being an intelligible theory that remains unknowable and skeptical of speculation about something not revealed in Scripture.

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