



*towards a biblical mind*

# A brief theology of time

*by Paul Mills*

*'What then is time? If no-one asks me, I know;  
but if I wish to explain it to one who asks, I know not'*

Augustine, *Confessions*, XI.14.

## Summary

This paper reviews the biblical witness that God is both transcendent over time whilst acting within it. Theological challenges to this view, including the development of 'free-will theism', have recently been allied to the findings of chaos theory and quantum mechanics. However, the traditional view of God's relation to time can accommodate these developments and remains the most satisfying solution to the puzzle of time. The results are a renewed appreciation of God's sovereignty over the universe, greater confidence in prayer and assurance about the future.

## Introduction

We are temporal creatures with a finite lifespan. Western lifestyle is dominated by considerations of time to such a degree that the clock is rivalled only by the printing press as the most influential invention of this millennium. In societies less obsessed with temporal flow, we are known as 'people with gods on their wrists'. Time travel is a pervasive theme of our science fiction.

Yet, with Augustine, although we instinctively know what time is and can sense its passing, we have extreme difficulty in defining it. We perceive time as approaching us from the 'future', passing across the vanishingly brief boundary of the 'present', into the 'past', but we cannot sense whether the past and the future exist as realities other than for their moment in the present. Yet physicists now talk of time as if it were akin to a fourth spatial dimension, such that all points on the spacetime continuum are equally 'real'.

This paper cannot attempt a comprehensive discussion of time. Rather it will focus on the biblical revelation of God's relation to time, how humanity attempts to deny or subvert that relation, and the practical implications for how we are to live 'in time'.

## God's relation to time

The biblical witness maintains a fine balance between stressing God's transcendence over time whilst emphasising that God is actively involved in sustaining the universe within time.

## God exists eternally outside the confines of time

Due to our temporal limitations, we struggle to conceive of a state outside time. It is well-nigh impossible for us to envisage anything without a 'beginning'. Yet within the restrictions of language, the biblical writers convey that God exists eternally. In particular, God's name – 'I AM WHO I AM' – seems to indicate his continuous present existence (Exodus 3:14). Christ is the 'Alpha and Omega who is, and who was and who is to come' (Revelation 1:8). The Lord is 'from everlasting to everlasting' (Psalm 90:2). By definition, the familiar speculation about 'what came before God' is futile.

## God initiated the passage of time in the act of creation

When God began to create the universe, time was initiated and the succession of moments and events commenced (e.g. Genesis 1:1; John 1:1–3; Colossians 1:16–17). Hence, time as we experience it does not automatically exist but, as with all creation, was dependent on God's creative fiat for its commencement. This is consistent with the current cosmological description of the interconnectedness of matter, space and time such that one cannot exist without the others, a description anticipated by Augustine's meditation that time is a meaningless concept without the existence of a universe in which processes

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occur: if matter existed but nothing changed, 'time' would have no meaning (*Confessions*, XI, 14).

### **God instituted the Sabbath to remind us of his sovereignty over our time**

The Sabbath was established to emulate God's ceasing from creative activity in time and to limit our working time (Exodus 20:8–11, Deuteronomy 5:12–15). In conjunction with the seasons, the Sabbath established a rhythmical pattern within time and was a weekly reminder of God's sovereignty over time. Just as payment of a tithe is an acknowledgement of God's material provision and ultimate ownership of our possessions, so observance of a day of rest affirms God's 'ownership' of our time.

### **God is immutable over time**

Whereas the created universe is subject to change within the temporal process, God remains 'the same' despite the passage of time. The second law of thermodynamics marks the direction of 'time's arrow' by describing the tendency of the universe to dissipate energy and progressively to decay, but God is untouched by the process. In contrast even to the heavens and the earth which will 'pass away', God is 'the same' (Psalm 102:25–27). He 'does not change like shifting shadows' (James 1:17). Unchangeableness is an attribute shared by Christ, who 'is the same yesterday and today and forever' (Hebrews 13:8). This, however, does not exclude the possibility of 'events' occurring within the timeless being of the Godhead.

### **God is not constrained by the passage of time and sees all moments simultaneously and with equal clarity**

'[W]ith the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day' (2 Peter 3:8, cf. Psalm 39:4; 90:4). For us, every day is 24 hours. We can neither speed up the passage of time nor slow it down. Even travelling close to the speed of light would not change how we experienced the passage of time – only how we perceived it in relation to others. God, however, is free from the limitations that we face in experiencing time in indivisible and inexorable units. He not only possesses both 'fast forward' and 'freeze-frame' but stands 'outside' time and is not limited to the succession of moments. To God, all of creation's existence is somehow 'present'. As C.S. Lewis put it:

*'If you picture Time as a straight line along which we have to travel, then you must picture God as the whole page on which the line is drawn. We come to the parts of the line one by one: we have to leave A behind before we get to B, and cannot reach C until we leave B behind. God, from above or outside or all around, contains the whole line, and sees it all.'*<sup>1</sup>

### **Time is a linear process with a preordained end**

Whilst some biblical writers depict history having cyclical features,<sup>2</sup> the overriding picture is of time within this universe being linear, having both a beginning (at creation), and a definite end (e.g. Acts 17:30–31). We do not know the exact time of the end, but it is already known by the Father (Mark 13:32). History has a fixed end-point, and therefore a destination. This contrasts particularly with the Hindu notion that time is endlessly repetitive and cyclical, which can result in apathy about the consequences of our actions within time. Rather, the belief that time is linear encourages purposive action (Psalm 90:10,12).

### **God alone knows and foretells future events with certainty**

A consequence of God's freedom from existence solely in 'the present' is that the future is literally an open book. This knowledge has been conveyed to his prophets and apostles: 'I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come...'<sup>3</sup> God's foreknowledge stretches to knowing in advance every detail of our personal existence: 'Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord... All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be' (Psalm 139:4,16).

### **God acts within time to bring about his purposes**

It would be inaccurate to think of God as disengaged from the temporal flow, as if he had lit the blue touch-paper at creation and then retired into timelessness. Rather, God actively upholds the creation every moment of its existence (e.g. Colossians 1:16), and operates within time to bring about his desired ends, including those foretold through his prophets (e.g. Acts 3:18). The Judaeo-Christian tradition continually looks back to moments in history when God acted in time to further the salvation of his people (such as at the exodus).<sup>4</sup> This is demonstrated most clearly in the Incarnation: '...when the time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman...' (Galatians 4:4–5) and in the Crucifixion: a 'testimony given at its proper time' (1 Timothy 2:6). Belief in God's actions within time is the very basis for petitionary prayer – if God is powerless to intervene in time then such prayer is pointless. It is this belief in the 'immanence' of God within time that distinguishes the Yahweh of the Bible from the Allah of the Qu'ran. Since the will of Allah is fixed and inscrutable, Muslims do not pray for him to act in a particular way, but merely seek to conform themselves to Allah's will, whatever that may be.

Hence, the biblical picture of God's relation to time is both of his creative mastery, his total foreknowledge and of his acting within time to fulfil his purposes.

### **Challenges to God's sovereignty over time**

This description of God's relationship to time has not gone unchallenged, either inside or outside the church.

#### **Deism**

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, deism grew out of a strong belief in the implacability of physical laws – God created the universe in accordance with a set of deterministic laws governing the motion and behaviour of every particle. He does not need to intervene with these particles since their paths within time have been mapped out from the beginning:

*'God created substances and gives them the force they need, and after that he leaves them to themselves and does nothing but conserve them in their actions.'*<sup>5</sup>

God established the initial conditions and laws to be such that they would achieve his intended goal without the need for further intervention. To suggest that God intervened in time implied a limit to his initial omniscience, as well as the abrogation of preordained natural 'laws'.

Two inferences were drawn. First, that there is no such thing as 'chance', in the sense of something occurring without an identifiable cause; and, second, that the future course of the physical

1 *Mere Christianity*, Collins, Glasgow, 1952, 144.

2 Both Judges and Revelation contain repetitive themes suggesting that some patterns may be discernible within history. Ecclesiastes 1 describes the cycles within physical processes to emphasise the pointlessness of a godless existence.

3 Isaiah 46:9–10; cf. 41:21–22; 42:9; 44:6–8; 45:21.

4 David Bebbington contrasts the Old Testament's depiction of Yahweh as a God who acts in history to bring about his purposes for individuals (e.g. Genesis 45:8) and for Israel (e.g. Psalm 136), with the Canaanite deities who were associated with spatial location rather than time (*Patterns in History*, IVP, Leicester, 1979).

5 Leibniz, G.W., *Theodicy*, ed. Austin Farrer, Routledge, London, 1952, para.27.

universe could, in theory at least, be exactly predicted – if we discovered all the laws governing the particles within the universe, knew their position, direction and velocity and had a sufficiently powerful computer. It was this last assertion (e.g. by Laplace) that underpinned the study of physical laws for over two centuries.

Deism has many attractions. It emphasises God's pre-eminence over, and distinction from, his creation. It stresses the omniscience and foreknowledge of God over time. It renders the universe intelligible by describing it in a set of observable regularities. And it reduces the perceived complexity of divine activity required at any instant – God has simply created the universe, set it in motion and retired a safe distance. It is logically appealing since it avoids many of the problems associated with believing that God is both 'eternal' and yet acts within time.

However, by assuming that the 'laws' of the physical universe are inviolable even by the lawgiver, deism is forced to come to conclusions that are incompatible with the biblical witness to God's actions within time. For example, 'miracles' either cannot happen or are a worrying aberration. Similarly, petitionary prayer becomes pointless since God cannot act in time to change the course of events that have been preordained. Rather, prayer becomes a process of moulding one's will to the preset divine plan. Most fundamentally, the action of God in sustaining the universe at every moment is denied.

#### *Divine ignorance and human free will*

Compared to deism, however, the more longstanding and popular objection to the traditional interpretation of the biblical revelation is that God cannot preordain or know the future. This is not necessarily derived from any inherent problem with conceiving of God being outside time. Rather, philosophers from Cicero onwards have rejected belief in God's foreknowledge of events since it is deemed incompatible with human freedom:

*'An omniscient being...knows everything that it is possible to know. There can, however, be no antecedent truth with respect to particular future free actions of men other than that they might and might not occur. God, accordingly, cannot know whether they will be performed until the time for the performance arrives.'*<sup>6</sup>

This is a natural conclusion to reach. First, it 'feels' to us as if the future is 'open' rather than on a tightly constrained path moving towards its fated end. The future is 'not there waiting for us but something we make as we go along'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, it is this feeling that encourages humanity to be creative:

*'...time has a sort of successive reality because it allows you to be creative, to do new things. Now the price of that freedom and creativity is that you can't predict the future exactly – not even God can.'*<sup>8</sup>

Second, if we are not free to make unconstrained choices then we cannot be held accountable for our actions. On this definition of responsibility, freedom of choice is the basis for personal morality – we can only be 'good' if we could choose evil. Finally, we have personal worth only if our choices and actions count for something – if we cannot change the course of events then, in the eternal scheme of things, our existence is meaningless. Indeed, what

6 Taylor, R., 'Determinism', in *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edwards, P., Macmillan, London, 1967, Vol.2, 363.  
7 Flood, R., and Lockwood, M., *The Nature of Time*, Basil Blackwood, Oxford, 1986, 2.  
8 Keith Ward, quoted in Stannard, R., *Science and Wonders*, Faber and Faber, London, 1996, 139.

would be the point of the whole creative process if we cannot 'surprise' God.<sup>9</sup>

The obvious conclusion from this is that God 'takes risks' with his plan for the universe:

*'If God created man in his own image, he must have created him capable of new initiatives and new insights which cannot be precisely or infallibly foreknown, but which give to the future a perpetual freshness as the inexhaustible variety of possible thoughts and actions, on the part of his children as well as himself, crystallizes into actuality.'*<sup>10</sup>

Similar sentiments are expressed by 'process theology'. Arising as something of a reaction to classical theism, this position asserts that process and change are indispensable aspects of genuine existence. Indeed, reality is defined to be the experience of change and so any notion that the ultimate reality behind the universe is immutable is rejected:

*'...to be actual is to be a process....Since the world as we experience it is a place of process, of change, of becoming,...the contrary notion that what is actual or fully real is beyond change leads to a devaluation of life in the world.'*<sup>11</sup>

The corollary drawn from this starting position is that God *must* change over time along with everything in creation. Indeed, some would argue that God is adding to his identity all the experiences that happen anywhere in the universe. God cannot be immutable over time because otherwise our existence would not matter to him.

The more recent school of 'free-will theism'<sup>12</sup> adopts a similar line of reasoning. This position again asserts that God cannot fully know the future, since this would encroach on the free exercise of human freedom.<sup>13</sup> God is not the aloof, immutable monarch who exists in a timeless eternity; rather he is a loving parent who shares the control of the future with us. God perfectly knows all there is to know (the past, the present and his intended actions in the future), but he comprehends what actually occurs as it happens rather than knowing it in advance, and responds to human actions in order to bring his purposes about eventually:

*'The future is determined by God not alone but in partnership with human agents. God gives us a role in shaping what the future will be. He is flexible and does not insist in doing things his way. God will adjust his own plans because he is sensitive to what humans think and do.'*<sup>14</sup>

Support for free-will theism is derived from various biblical passages. In addition to overriding emphasis being placed on love as the principal facet of God's nature (1 John 4:16),<sup>15</sup> and the evidence that God is deeply and 'emotionally' engaged with the actions of his creatures (see Hosea), support is sought from those passages which depict divinely inspired prophecy as conditional (Jeremiah 18:6–10, Jonah 3), and God as 'repenting' or changing his mind (e.g. Genesis 6:6;

9 For instance, see David Pailin quoted in Stannard, *ibid.*, 140–1.  
10 Lucas, J.R., *The Future*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1989, 233. See also similar quotations from Hasker, Adams and Swinburne in Helm, P., *The Providence of God*, IVP, Leicester, 1993, 40–42. Helm notes that the common reason why these theologians believe God 'takes risks' is that only then is there a place for human freedom.  
11 Cobb, J.B., and Griffin, D.R., *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1976, 14.  
12 Pinnock, C., et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove, Illinois, 1994.  
13 Pinnock, *op. cit.*, 121–123.  
14 *Ibid.*, 113.  
15 *Ibid.*, 15, 23.

1 Samuel 15:35). The advantages claimed are that the unbiblical baggage of Greek philosophical belief in the impassibility of the divine is discarded; the logical problems of God being 'timeless' and yet acting within time are circumvented; petitionary prayer truly becomes involvement in divine action rather than simply conforming oneself to God's predetermined will; and that evangelism truly 'matters' rather than merely revealing the elect.

### *The discovery of scientific 'chance'?*

Whilst God's foreknowledge has long been deemed incompatible with true freedom, two recent scientific developments are now used to reinforce the case for indeterminism.

First, the discovery of quantum uncertainty early this century has led to the belief that truly 'chance' events occur. Observations of quantum phenomena suggest that, at a subatomic level, events occur without an apparent 'cause'. For instance, there is no way for us to know when a particular uranium atom will decay into a lead atom, even though we can detect this event once it has happened. It seems to occur unprompted. Such reactions are still governed by statistical regularities (allowing us to construct nuclear power stations), but the individual events themselves seem to occur without explanation and appear purely random.

Second, the discovery of 'chaotic' systems with non-linear dynamics has led to greater understanding of why certain events are almost impossible to predict. Such systems display the property that a small perturbation can set off a chain reaction so that its effect on the whole system is disproportionately large. The best known example of a chaotic system is that of the atmosphere. This can display the 'butterfly effect': the beat of a butterfly's wing could start a series of events that might lead to a hurricane on the other side of the globe.

That such small events can have large effects means that forecasting the state of such a system for any substantial period becomes virtually impossible. Hence, we can forecast tomorrow's weather with a fair degree of accuracy but that of a month ahead with almost no confidence whatsoever. This is not to say that chaotic systems do not obey the general regularities of cause-and-effect, just that the interactions within the system are so complex that they do not necessarily follow the usual pattern of reverting to an average expected outcome. Also, if we are to make accurate predictions, we must know the initial conditions of the system very precisely.

These discoveries have led some to doubt the determinacy of the future. For instance:

*'The intrinsically statistical character of atomic events and the instability of many physical systems to minute fluctuations, ensures that the future remains open and undetermined by the present.'*<sup>16</sup>

Certainly, both quantum uncertainty and the existence of chaotic systems pose difficulties for the belief in absolute scientific determinism. For they mean that we will never know enough about the initial conditions or the behaviour of its components ever to 'solve' the universe and predict its behaviour exactly from the outset.<sup>17</sup> Laplace's dream is now seen to be unrealisable.

But these discoveries have also been used to deny that God can either know or preordain every event that occurs within time, including those in our lives, and to reassert the place of human freedom. For instance, as a consequence of quantum uncertainty, Peacocke believes that this '...inherent unpredictability...represents a limitation of the knowledge even an omniscient God could have' of events at a quantum level; indeed, that the future cannot currently

'exist' and that therefore there is no content of future events for God to know.<sup>18</sup> Polkinghorne believes that quantum uncertainty means that the future is 'open' and that God allows the universe a degree of 'independence' in order to enhance its creativity. God is still sovereign but does not know the path the system, including mankind, will take.<sup>19</sup> A favourite analogy is that of the cosmic chess player:

*'God is the supreme Grandmaster who has everything under his control... [W]hatever the finite players do, God's plan will be executed; though various lines of God's play will answer to various moves of the finite players...No line of play that finite players may think of can force God to improvise: his knowledge of the game already embraces all the possible variant lines of play, theirs do not.'*<sup>20</sup>

God may not have entirely relinquished control over the course of events but he does not know which 'line of play' events will take.

### **The reassertion of divine sovereignty**

Philosophers and theologians deny the omniscience of God<sup>21</sup> on the basis that this precludes a place for human freedom, creativity, self-worth and moral accountability. These claims are partly based on the psychological insecurity that comes from the belief that self-worth is derived from the choices we exercise and the 'difference' we make. But they also come from the more deep-seated objection that experiencing personal 'freedom' by definition rules out any form of divine predetermination or prescience over time.

The Christian rejoinder to the former insecurity is that 'self-worth' in the temporal process is derived from a deepening relationship with God, rather than from any lasting impression we make on the spacetime continuum. The response to the second is to recognise in it the rebellion of human pride in believing we must be allowed unfettered freedom, and then to reassert the Bible's insistence on both divine sovereignty and human responsibility (e.g. Acts 4:24-28). This can be done either by positing divine foreknowledge of what will cause us to exercise our 'free' choices in a particular way; or by defining human 'freedom' in such a way that we can be held responsible for our choices despite their preordination.<sup>22</sup>

Remarkably, the concept of time implied by relativity theory is consistent with the traditional notion of God standing outside the timeline. Time is conceived as the fourth dimension in space with the whole of history laid out as a changeless continuum - otherwise observers moving relative to one another would disagree about what time 'now' is. This concept of the whole history of the universe being 'created' at the inception of both space and time means that it is now easier for astrophysicists to consider belief in divine foreknowledge than for theologians.<sup>23</sup>

As regards chaos theory and quantum uncertainty, neither development necessarily precludes the foreknowledge of God or his preordination of events. This is clearer with chaotic dynamics since what we observe are not phenomena without apparent causes.

18 Peacocke, A., 'God's Interaction with the World', in Russell, R.J., Murphy, N., and Peacocke, A., eds., *Chaos and Complexity*, Vatican Observatory Publications, Vatican City, 1995, 279-280.

19 Polkinghorne, J., *Science and Providence*, SPCK, London, 1989, 77-84.

20 Geach, P., *Providence and Evil*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977, 58.

21 One possible way out of some of the questions concerning whether 'time' has an objective existence or is purely subjective is to define time 'relationally' - that is, 'time' is what happens as the persons of the Trinity interact (see Osborn, L., 'Spacetime and Revelation', *Science and Christian Belief*, October 1996, 121-122). This relational perspective may resolve the puzzle of how existence in the 'new heaven and the new earth' can be both 'everlasting' and yet involve perception of the passage of time and change (e.g. Revelation 21:25; 22:2,5).

22 See Helm, *op.cit.*, ch.2.

23 Eg. Stannard, *op.cit.*, 144.

16 Davies, P., *The Mind of God*, Simon & Schuster, London and New York, 1992, 201.  
17 e.g. see Ward, K., *God, Chance and Necessity*, OneWorld Publications, Oxford, 1996, 81.

Rather, relationships between events exist but are far more complex and less tractable to simple extrapolation than linear ones. Thus, whilst the computational complexity of divine foreknowledge and coordination of events must be that much greater, there is no inherent reason why God could not sustain a universe containing chaotic processes if he could sustain one containing linear ones.<sup>24</sup> After all, Scripture is replete with claims to God's power over the weather (e.g. 1 Kings 8:35; Psalm 78:47–48). He even dictates the fall of the dice (Proverbs 16:33), an outcome that is extremely sensitive to initial conditions.

Quantum uncertainty is of a different order. Here events seem to occur without any apparent cause. One response has been to say that these phenomena do not occur in this fashion – there are 'hidden variables' at work that we cannot yet observe which cause the quantum events we do observe. (Although taken up by Einstein, this position is now held only by a small minority of physicists.) Alternatively, theistic comfort can be taken from the observation that quantum events still accord with statistical regularities and are not observed at a level greater than the atomic. Hence, God could permit truly chance events to occur at the sub-atomic level, but these will not have a material impact at the macro level at which he ordains events.<sup>25</sup> Again, it has been posited that God himself acts as the 'hidden variable' that is the ultimate cause of quantum phenomena,<sup>26</sup> or that there is a middle ground in which God knows the propensities towards quantum events and may intervene to change them if required for his wider purpose.<sup>27</sup> Whilst quantum uncertainty does raise new questions about the degree to which God ordains the smallest of subatomic events, it does not provide the advocates of 'openness' with a clinching argument. It merely defines the limits of our ignorance of how God operates in the universe.

The position of free-will theism and those who seek to carve out a space for human freedom seems even more difficult to reconcile with a belief in God's ultimate triumph over evil in the light of chaos theory. The discovery of such systems (of which human history appears to be a prime example), means that it is even more difficult to conceive of a God who improvises in response to the 'lines of play' of his creatures, in order to preserve their freedom. In chaotic systems, even small perturbations can result in far-reaching consequences. So, if God does 'play the game' in this way, but has a particular 'endgame' in mind, then he must become progressively more interventionist over time as his degrees of freedom for action diminish.

Free-will theism tries to provide comfort for Christians that their actions and prayers 'matter'. But it fails to engage with the large preponderance of the biblical material that describes God's sovereignty over time, and ignores the longstanding interpretation of the 'repentance' passages that God is accommodating the explanation of his actions to human capacities of understanding.<sup>28</sup> The result is to depict a God who cannot always accurately prophecy the future, cannot know the full consequences of his actions, and cannot know that his purposes ultimately will prevail. Free-will theism deprives Christians of assurance in their own salvation and the triumph of

God's will in the future. Ironically, it diminishes one's confidence in prayer: who would be foolhardy enough to pray for God to act if one believed that God did not know the consequences of answering such a prayer? The strange implication of free-will theism is that we can affect God but he cannot affect us.

### Living in time

We have seen that the biblical witness is to a God who is both outside time yet active within it. He preordains and foreknows our actions within time, yet also actively upholds the universe at every instant within the temporal flow. How does this belief affect the way we should live in time?

### How not to live 'in time' – usurping God's sovereignty

A deep-rooted inclination of humanity is to try to emulate some of God's suzerainty over time, particularly with regard to acquiring information about, or control over, the future. The most ancient of these methods is some form of divination to pierce the veil of the future. These have ranged from interpreting patterns in the entrails of sacrificed animals to palmistry, tarot cards and astrology. The widespread use of divination betrays a universal desire to throw off the temporal limitations with which we have been created. Man is not content with his confined temporal position and lays claim to this divine knowledge. Unsurprisingly, the presence of diviners was proscribed (Deuteronomy 18:10) and condemned (Zechariah 10:2) within OT Israel.

Both secular society and the church are too careless with how they treat predictions and forecasts of the future. Too often we seem willing to listen to those prophets, both within and outside the church, who lay claim to knowledge of the future. Whilst God does announce events 'before they spring into being' (Isaiah 42:9), to claim to make such a statement is an awesome responsibility. One of the tests laid down for the discernment of 'true' from 'false' prophecy was, of course, whether the events predicted occurred (Deuteronomy 18:20–22). Prophecy which proved to be false was a capital offence because of the 'presumption' of the false prophet who claimed to speak for God when not inspired to do so. Perhaps we would hear of fewer predictions made within the church if we understood how seriously God takes such presumption.

But the more widespread claims to 'prophecy' come from economists, scientists and sociologists. For instance, economists still derive equations describing how the economy operates from past data and use these to inform their forecasts of next year's GDP, despite the signal failure of any one model consistently to predict much better than forecasts derived randomly. Ultimately, such prediction fails because it must assume that the future will be like the past. But time and again, we are too prone to believe those who forecast by extrapolating current experience – be they the doom-mongers of imminent exhaustion of the world's food supplies or the optimistic believers in mankind's evolution towards a destiny of greater technological, genetic and moral progress. It was those 'without knowledge' that proclaimed that 'tomorrow will be like today, or even far better' (Isaiah 56:12), and 'scoffers' who say that 'everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation' (2 Peter 3:4). By taking our experience within time and extrapolating it back or forwards we are displaying our collective egocentricity – as if only our experience now was valid and we can interpret the rest of the timeline solely in the light of it. Surely, those cognizant of God's sovereignty over time should adopt a more humble attitude that leaves room for unanticipated contingencies.

### How to live 'in time' – humility, urgency and hope

Of course, this is not to say that all planning and provision for the future is inherently presumptuous. Those who take Christ's

24 Wilkinson, D., *God, the Big Bang and Stephen Hawking*, Monarch, Crowborough, 1996, 60.

25 'The basic framework of creation is fixed, but the details are not. In the smaller-scale behaviour of things, indeterminacy seems to allow physical systems a degree of freedom which seems to parallel our own sense of ourselves as freely acting beings' – Bussey, P.J., 'Indeterminacy, Time and the Future', *Science and Christian Belief*, April 1997, 82.

26 MacKay, D.M., 'The Mythology of Chance' in *The Open Mind and Other Essays*, IVP, Leicester, 1988, 204. Dowe, P., 'Chance and Providence', *Science and Christian Belief*, April 1997, 3–20.

27 Davis, J.J., 'Quantum Indeterminacy and the Omniscience of God', *Science and Christian Belief*, October 1997, 129–144.

28 E.g. Calvin, *Institutes*, I, 17, 13. For critiques of free-will theism see 'Has God been held hostage by philosophy?', *Christianity Today*, January 9th 1995, 30–34 and Erickson, M.J., *The Evangelical Left*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, 104–107.

injunction not to 'worry about tomorrow' (Matthew 6:34) as an excuse for indolence are ignoring the balance of the biblical material.<sup>29</sup> Wise stewardship of the gifts we have been given requires a degree of planning, anticipation and risk-taking. Rather, the attitude in which we plan and contract should be one which humbly recognises our ignorance over the future:

*'Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth' (Proverbs 27:1).*

James condemned the rich businessman, not necessarily for planning his sales itinerary, but rather for the presumption with which it was done: 'all such boasting is evil' (James 4:13-16).

The practical application of such an attitude is that we need to change the way we arrange our affairs to embody a 'contingent' attitude towards the future. For instance, borrowing (particularly to finance consumption or speculation), involves presuming upon future events to transpire as expected if the debt is to be repaid. Another consequence of our ignorance about the future is that, since we do not know and should not presume that we will be alive tomorrow, we need to make the most of every moment granted to us (e.g. Ephesians 5:16). However, this is always in the context of service to God and others. By contrast, the postmodern obsession with the 'present' also results in trying to make the most of every moment, but more in the spirit of a hedonistic cult of 'eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die'.

Another radical difference that the biblical perspective on time can make to those who live in its light is that we, among all people, can be confident about the future – be it our own or that of the whole universe. For instance, in Psalm 139, David takes great comfort from the discovery that God knows every word he will speak before he utters it. Rather than railing against a God who has abrogated his free will, David is comforted by God's intimate foreknowledge of his life. This belief gives an assurance that the

pattern of our lives has been planned instead of being a random outcome of chance events:

*'Sov'reign Ruler of the skies, ever gracious ever wise;  
All my times are in thy hand, all events at thy command.*

*He that form'd me in the womb,  
He shall guide me to the tomb;  
All my times shall ever be, Order'd by his wise decree.*

*Plagues and deaths around me fly;  
Till he bids I cannot die;  
Not a single shaft can hit, Till the God of love sees fit'*  
(John Ryland).

But perhaps most clearly in our contemporary society, the biblical theology of time gives comfort that there is a purpose to creation after all and that history is proceeding towards its divinely ordained end (Titus 1:2). For if the future is 'open', and human freedom could ultimately thwart the will of God, then there can be no confidence that evil will not triumph and the plans of God for salvation will not be frustrated.

Hope for the future was not a uniquely Christian trait in the 'modern' age when belief in the inexorable progress of humanity through technological progress, economic growth and moral improvement held sway. But pollution, wars, famine and unemployment have shaken our faith in the future. Even astrophysicists can only offer two alternative futures: either a universe that expands forever, ultimately cools to absolute zero and suffers 'heat death', or one that eventually collapses in a 'Big Crunch'. In a postmodern era obsessed with the present and disillusioned with the future, hope remains the most attractive feature of the Christian theology of time.

29 See Mills, P.S., 'Faith versus Prudence? Christians and Financial Security', *Cambridge Papers*, March 1995.

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**Next issue: The Great Commissions: creation and salvation**