

HERMENEUTICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS AND DIVINE MUTABILITY

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HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION

The question of the immutability of God is not a new topic of debate. Nor is it a trivial matter. Disputants on all sides believe that they are defending a view of the nature of God that is essential to a coherent theological system, and one that is true to the biblical revelation. J. Pelikan observes, however, that the “early Christian picture of God was controlled by the self-evident axiom, accepted by all, of the absoluteness and the impassibility of the divine nature.”¹ Thomas Weinandy points out that the “early Christological controversies and debates were never concerned with the immutability and impassibility of God as such,”² and Reinhold Seeberg observes that among the early apologists the true Christian doctrines included, “There is One God, the Creator, Adorner, and Preserver of the world. . . . The invisible God is unbegotten, nameless, eternal, incomprehensible, unchangeable Being.”³ Irenaeus himself asserted, “let them learn that God alone, who is Lord of all, is without beginning and without end, being truly and for ever the same, and always remaining the same unchangeable Being.”⁴

As Thomas G. Weinandy points out, among the early church fathers, “the immutability of God, as philosophically understood, is taken for granted.”⁵ And according to Etienne Gilson, the question of God’s immutability was for St. Augustine not simply one aspect of his doctrine, but was “perhaps, the most profound and most constant element in his metaphysical thought.”⁶ As Augustine states in *De Trinitate*,

For as wisdom is so called from the being wise, and knowledge from knowing; so from being (1) comes that which we call essence. And who is there that is, more than He who said to His servant Moses, “I am that I am;” and, “Thus shall thou say unto the children of Israel, He who is hath sent me unto you?” (2) But other things that are called essences or substances admit of accidents, whereby a change, whether great or small, is produced in them. But there can be no accident of this kind in respect to God; and therefore He who is God is the only

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, vol. 1, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971), 229.

² Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change?* (Still River, Massachusetts: St. Bede’s Publications, 1985), xxi.

³ Reinhold Seeberg, *Text-Book of the History of Doctrines*, vol. 1, *History of Doctrines in the Ancient Church*, trans. Charles E. Hay (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1964), 114-15.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 2, 34, 2.

⁵ Weinandy, *Does God Change?*, xxi.

⁶ Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* (New York: Octagon Books, 1983), 22.

unchangeable substance or essence, to whom certainly BEING itself, whence comes the name of essence, most especially and most truly belongs.⁷

The immutability of God has been held by many noted theologians throughout church history such as Thomas Aquinas⁸ and Francis Turretin.⁹ In his *Body of Divinitie*, Bishop James Ussher asserted, “God’s essence or substance cannot be augmented or diminished . . . his nature and will cannot be changed: but he remaineth constant without shadow of change, and will be alwaies such as he hath been from all eternity. . . . The Repentance attributed so often to God in the Scriptures, signifieth no mutation in God’s nature; but in his actions, immutably decreed from all eternity. And the Scripture in this speaketh after our manner, that we may better understand what is the nature of God against sin.”¹⁰

CRITIQUE OF DR. CHISOLM’S VIEW

Arguably, the immutability of God has been the predominate view of the Christian Church. Indeed, in his article titled “Does God Change His Mind?”¹¹ Dr. Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., Professor of Old Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, acknowledges, “Most Christian theologians have affirmed that God is immutable.”¹² In spite of what seems to have been a unanimous testimony from the early church to the immutability of God, recent theological inquiry has called this assumption into question. As Ronald Nash observes, “Of all the current debates about the divine attributes, the disagreement over the property of immutability is the most heated.”¹³ The debate is not only conducted on a theological level. It is also waged on the level of exegesis.

Dr. Chisholm, enters the debate by addressing what he identifies as a “tension and apparent contradiction” between certain Old Testament passages that imply immutability, and others that seem to speak of the possibility of God changing. Dr. Chisholm quotes passages in which the Niphal or Hithpael form of the verbal root *nchm* is used in which the statements seem to say that God does not change: Numbers 23:19 (“God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent”), 1 Samuel 15:29 (“And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His

⁷ Augustine, *On The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1981), V, 2.

⁸ S. Thomae de Aquino, *Summa Theologiae* (Ottawa, Canada: Commissio Piana, 1953), I, 9, 1.

⁹ Francisco Turretino, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (Fredericum Haring. Trajecti ad Rhenum: Ernestum Voskuyl, 1696). Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1992), Vol. 1, Quest. XI, article XI, 206. Other theologians who have subscribed to the notion of God’s immutability are, Thomas Ridgley, *A Body of Divinity* (Glasgow: John Bryce, 1770), 37ff; John Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (Oxford: David Christy, 1836), 102ff; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 58f; Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena, Bibliology, Theology Proper* (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), 217ff.

¹⁰ James Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie, or the Summe and Substance of Christian Religion; Catechistically Propounded, and Explained, by way of Question and Answer: Methodically and Familiarly Handled* (London: Printed by M.F. for Tho: Downes and Geo: Badger, 1647), 35

¹¹ Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., “Does God ‘Change His Mind’?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October-December 1995): 387-99.

¹² Chisholm, 387.

¹³ Ronald H. Nash, *The Concept of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 99.

mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind”), and Psalm 110:4 (“The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind”); and several additional passages in which the same root is used in a Niphal form which seem to “assert that God typically does change His mind (Jer. 18:5-10; Joel 2:13; Jon. 4:2), describe Him doing so (Exod. 32:14; Amos 7:3, 6; Jon. 3:10), or at least assume that He might (Jer. 26:3; Joel 2:14; Jon. 3:9).”

Among the disputants, there does not seem to be a question that certain passages seem to indicate that God *does not* change, and certain other passages seem to say that God *does* change His mind. As Dr. Chisholm acknowledges, evangelicals desire to resolve what appears to be a contradiction in the biblical revelation. For those who hold to the doctrine of inerrancy, it simply cannot be the case that both statements can be true in the same sense. In other words, the tension and apparent contradiction are evident because of a commitment to an inerrant text and the constraint of the law of non-contradiction. Dr. Chisholm’s article is one such attempt to resolve the tension and assuage the appearance of contradiction.

A common tactic employed by those who oppose the notion of immutability is to brush aside all attempts to deal with problem texts as figures of speech. For example, Dr. Chisholm discards any attempt to understand as anthropomorphisms texts that seem to speak of God changing by labeling such efforts as “arbitrary and drastic” solutions.¹⁴ And yet for virtually all of the theologians and exegetes to whom reference has been made the consistent means of handling those texts which seem to indicate that God changes has been to understand them anthropomorphically. For example, Francis Turretin asserts, “Repentance is attributed to God after the manner of men (*anthropopaths*) but must be understood after the manner of God (*theopreps*):”¹⁵ by which he indicates that the proper understanding of these texts is to view them as anthropomorphisms. In his *Systematic Theology*, Lewis Sperry Chafer asserts, “The change in God’s treatment of men is described anthropomorphically, as if it were a change in God himself,—other passages in close conjunction with the first being given to correct any possible misapprehension.”¹⁶ That is, statements that speak of God changing are figurative expressions that attempt to present certain aspects of the nature of God by ascribing to God human characteristics without at the same time ascribing to God human limitations normally associated with those characteristics. Seeing that such prominent theologians throughout church history have held to this view, simply to dismiss it as “arbitrary and drastic” itself seems rather arbitrary and drastic.

A popular response to this approach is to charge one’s opponent with eisegesis—of reading into the text one’s preconceived theological or philosophical presuppositions. Dr. Chisholm offers an alternative to anthropomorphic interpretation. He proposes that the exegete should let the biblical evidence “speak for itself.”¹⁷ However, such an approach seems simplistic. The abundance of

¹⁴ It is poisoning the well for Dr. Chisholm to assert that some interpreters “dismiss” these texts as anthropomorphic (387). The use of the emotive term “dismiss” is a misrepresentation of the manner in which theologians and exegetes have handled these passages. Serious theologians and exegetes do not simply “dismiss” these passages as anthropomorphic. Rather, they interpret them as figures of speech, namely, anthropomorphisms, and they attempt to handle them responsibly in their respective contexts. It remains to be seen whether they do so successfully, but to “dismiss” the scholarly labors of faithful men throughout church history in their efforts to honestly come to terms with what they believe the Scripture reveals about God’s nature does a serious injustice to a long tradition of theology and exegesis.

¹⁵ Turretino, *Institutio*, Locus Tertius, Quaestio. XI, XI, 227. “*Pœnitentia* Deo tribuitur ἀθρωποπαθῶς, sed intelligenda est θεωπρεπῶς;” English Turretin, *Institutes*, Third Topic, Question XI, XI, 206.

¹⁶ Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 218-19.

¹⁷ Chisholm, 387.

recent speculation on the role of presuppositions in interpretation would seem to argue that to assume that one can simply “let the text speak for itself” is naive at best. In fact, Dr. Chisholm’s answer to the question, “Does God change His mind?” is, “It all depends.”¹⁸ The obvious question is, “On what does the answer depend?” And the answer to this question is just as obvious. It all depends on one’s interpretation of the passages in question. Whereas the one position is based on anthropomorphic interpretation, the opposing position is based on an interpretation that does not see these statements as anthropomorphic. Nevertheless, the conclusions to which the proponents of each position come are based on their respective interpretations. So, to claim that one interpretation is somehow able to let the biblical evidence speak for itself while, at the same time, implying that those of the opposing camp have somehow not allowed this, is misleading.

It has been argued in many recent books on interpretation that no interpreter approaches a text apart from his presuppositional framework. For example William Klein, Craig Blomberg, and Robert Hubbard assert, “No one interprets anything without a set of underlying assumptions,”¹⁹ and Elliott Johnson asks, “Can the meaning be textually determined when it must be construed by an interpreter? And is not an interpreter’s preunderstanding (not textually based) necessary to construe the meaning correctly?”²⁰ What does it mean, then, for Dr. Chisholm to claim that “a more satisfying solution exists, if the biblical evidence is allowed to speak for itself”?²¹ Such an assertion seems to imply that this interpreter believes he is somehow exempt from a presuppositional framework through which he will understand and report what the biblical evidence says. But, to assume that one can approach the text without a presuppositional framework is itself a presuppositional framework. Ultimately, it will be necessary for the interpreter to explain to his readers what he thinks the text says, and what he thinks the text says is the result of interpreting the text through his presuppositional grid.

Another common objection that has been raised against those who hold to the doctrine of immutability is that they are imposing their philosophy upon the text. However, any assumption about the proper relationship between philosophy and hermeneutics is itself a philosophical presupposition. Those who believe that an interpreter should lay aside philosophical presuppositions when coming to the biblical text are themselves coming to the biblical text with the philosophical presupposition that philosophical presuppositions should be laid aside. It would seem that Dr. Chisholm, for one, comes to the text with a metaphysical presupposition about the nature of God, namely, that it is at least possible that God could change His mind.

In his article on “Immutability and Impassibility,” Richard Creel explicitly asserts that this must be the approach an interpreter should take.

Whether God is immutable or mutable, impassible or passible must be deduced from his nature as an APB [absolute perfect being]. Prior to deduction we must stay open to all the possibilities, namely that God is both immutable and impassible, or neither, or one but not the other. Further, we must stay open to the possibility that we can distinguish various aspects in God, and that God is both immutable and impassible in one of those aspects, neither in

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg, and Robert L. Hubbard, *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 87.

²⁰ Elliott E. Johnson, *Expository Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 38.

²¹ Chisholm, 387.

another aspect, and one in a third aspect but not the other in that same aspect. Finally, it may be the case not only that immutability and impassibility apply indifferently to different aspects of God, but also that there are different facets of these different aspects and that immutability and impassibility apply differently to different facets of the same aspect.²²

Some would object, however, that such an “openness” to the text is not a philosophical presupposition, but a theological, exegetical, or methodological assumption. But, the question of whether God can change is inextricably bound to questions of the nature of time and eternity, which are philosophical questions. To assume that it is at least possible that God can change necessarily involves assumptions about these concomitant philosophical questions. Clearly, this assumption is every bit as philosophical as the assumption of immutability. Not only so, but the supposed assumption of openness is every bit as determinative of the outcome of one’s exegesis.

For example, in his introductory comments, Dr. Chisholm asserts, “In these cases He ‘changes His mind’ in the sense that He decides, at least for the time being, not to do what He had planned or announced as His intention.”²³ Now, in what sense can it be said that God “decides,” or in what manner can the qualifying phrase “for the time being” be applied to God? It would seem that this statement implies that God is involved in the process of temporal and discursive reasoning in which He relates propositions and arrives at a conclusion. If we allow Professor Chisholm’s own text to “speak for itself” the implication is that he believes that God is temporal in some way. However, it is possible that he is simply employing a normal convention of human language, namely, a figure of speech in which he is attributing human qualities to God without attempting to imply the limitations associated with these qualities. In other words, it may be the case that he is using these terms anthropomorphically.

However, since in his conclusion he asserts, “Passages declaring that God typically changes His mind as an expression of His love and mercy demonstrate that statements describing God as relenting should not be dismissed as anthropomorphic,”²⁴ there would seem to be no other conclusion at which to arrive than that Dr. Chisholm is *not* using the expressions “decide” and “for the time being” anthropomorphically, but is applying them univocally to God. In other words, Dr. Chisholm is apparently applying these temporal terms to God in precisely the same way they are applied to men, including the implications of the associated temporal limitations. These statements inevitably reveal the philosophical and theological assumptions with which Professor Chisholm comes to the text, namely, that it is at least possible that God is somehow temporal.

The notion that God is somehow temporal would seem to be a necessary corollary of the claim that God changes. Change involves a series of before and afters--before the change and after the change. But, a series of before and afters is at least integral to the nature of time,²⁵ and the

²² Richard E. Creel, “Immutability and Impassibility,” in *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 315-16.

²³ Chisholm, 388.

²⁴ Although the circularity of this statement cannot be addressed at length, it cannot be passed without comment. Essentially what Dr. Chisholm is saying in this statement is, “Passages that are not taken anthropomorphically cannot be taken anthropomorphically.”

²⁵ A strictly Aristotelian notion of time would make the relation of before and after the sum of the nature of time: time is a measurement of before and afters. However, it is true that the Aristotelian notion is in no way generally held by philosophers. Nevertheless, it is also the case that the relation of before and afters is generally held to be at least an integral part of the notion of time even if it is not the sum of that notion. Consequently, to claim that a being exists in such a relation necessarily indicates that the being under consideration is involved in temporality to some degree.

very antithesis of the nature of eternity. Now, the assumption that it is at least possible that God could change necessarily involves the corollary presupposition that God could somehow be temporal, or at least that the implication of temporality is not inappropriate when applied univocally to God. But, the rejection of immutability and the assumption of possible temporality predetermines one's interpretation of the text. It predetermines one's interpretation in that it does not preclude the univocal predication of certain qualities to the nature of God.

But, this is the very point at which proponents of mutability would claim that they are allowing the text to "speak for itself." In other words, they would claim that they are not approaching the text with the predetermined assumption that God *must* be immutable. Indeed, it seems to be an underlying assumption of interpreters like Dr. Chisholm that it is the role of the exegete to burst past metaphysical presuppositions and endeavor to discover what the text meant in the context in which it was written. To their credit, this methodological assumption seems to be driven by the desire not to be guilty of eisegesis. Therefore, they seek not to be forced by the metaphysical assumption of immutability to understand certain passages anthropomorphically. Rather, they seem to believe that they can allow the texts to say what they say, and they can then draw conclusions about the nature of God from all the statements about God. Assuming for the moment that this is in fact what is being done, and that it is being done successfully, the question that is not addressed is, Is this an appropriate approach to the text? Is it appropriate to attempt to approach the text, in a sense, *tabula rasa*?²⁶ Is such an approach even possible?

According to the approaches of Dr. Chisholm and Richard Creel, it is perfectly reasonable and hermeneutically preferable to come to the biblical text with the assumption that it is at least possible that God could change. However, if this same kind of methodological assumption is employed in other instances it would seem to lead to absurdities. For example, it should be equally reasonable and preferable to come to the text with the assumption that it is at least possible that God has a physical body, and one should let the "biblical evidence speak for itself." After all, interpretation should not be guilty of imposing metaphysical, or physical, assumptions about God on the text. So, when the text says, "The eternal God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms" (Deut. 33:27), one should not "dismiss" these texts as anthropomorphic, since doing this would seem to be equally "arbitrary and drastic." Rather, the interpreter should conclude that God does indeed have a physical body, or at least that He has arms.²⁷ But, this does not seem to be an appropriate approach to the biblical text because a physical being could not be God, for reasons that seem to be obvious.

It would seem to be the case, in fact, that there are certain assumptions about God that must be presupposed when one approaches the text that was given to us by Him. For example, one should approach the Bible with the assumption that it is *not* the case that God both exists and does not exist in the same sense. There are also certain aspects of God's nature that must be assumed before one comes to Him. One must assume that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Heb. 11:6). No one will come to a god whom they do not believe exists. Certain aspects of God's eternal power and divine nature are clearly revealed in the creation (Rom. 1:19-20), and these are assumptions that the interpreter must bring to His book. Surely it would be safe

²⁶ I do not mean to imply by this statement that Dr. Chisholm assumes that it is possible to approach a text *tabula rasa* in a complete sense. Rather, Dr. Chisholm's own introduction indicates that, at least with reference to this one theological point, he assumes that we must approach the text without any preconceived assumption that God is immutable. Nevertheless, the assumption that he can "let the text speak for itself" reveals an assumption that it is possible to approach the text in a sense, *tabula rasa*.

²⁷ In fact, this is the very approach taken by Finis Jennings Dake and the very conclusion to which he arrives in his *magnum opus*, *God's Plan for Man* (Lawrenceville, Georgia: Dake Bible Sales, 1977), 53-57.

to say that evangelical interpreters would not be willing to approach the text with the assumption that it is at least possible that God is a man, or that it is at least possible that God is a liar. But, if it is inappropriate to approach the text with these assumptions, why is it not equally inappropriate to approach the text with the assumption that it is at least possible for God to change?

However, simply because this approach leads to absurdity or obvious falsehood with reference to some subjects does not necessarily disqualify the approach. It could very well be the case that it is inappropriate to come to the text with the assumption that God could be a liar, but completely appropriate to come to the text with the assumption that God could change His mind. What would make the approach appropriate for some subjects but not for others? The answer to this question is not exegetical—it is philosophical. Consequently, the assumptions on the one side of the issue are no more or less philosophical and metaphysical than the assumptions of the other side.

The *reductio ad absurdum* examples above illustrate a basic principle of exegesis, namely, interpretations that are in conflict and cannot be settled on one level of investigation must be considered on a higher level, or, more appropriately, a level more foundational to the present level of investigation. For example, if a conflict cannot be settled on the level of grammar, the exegete must consider the problem on the level of lexicography, or authorial style, and so on. So, since capable exegetes differ about whether the passages in question should be taken anthropomorphically or not, the conflict obviously cannot be settled on a “pure” level. That is, it cannot be settled on the level of lexicography, grammar, style or even context *alone*.

In fact, it would seem that this conflict cannot be resolved on a purely exegetical level, since the texts can and are taken figuratively by some and non-figuratively by others. There is no argument among exegetes that the texts *seem* to say that God both does and does not change. But, the law of non-contradiction demands that they cannot both be true in the same sense. And, Dr. Chisholm’s assertion that God changes his mind with reference to announcements of blessing and judgment in which cases “the human response to His announcement determines what He will do,”²⁸ is not decisive since these conclusions are based on Dr. Chisholm’s interpretation of various passages and whether they are speaking about decrees or simply announcements. Additionally, equally good exegetical arguments have been set forth for concluding that these texts are in fact not instances of God changing *His* mind, but rather of persons changing *their* minds (this perspective is considered in more detail below). Consequently, the efforts on the level of “pure exegesis” issue in an impasse, and since an exegetical impasse cannot be settled on a purely exegetical level, the question must be taken to a different level. But, the theological question of the nature of God rests on philosophical questions of the nature of time and eternity and their relation, as we have already pointed out. Ultimately, it would seem that the question must be addressed: In the case of the question of the immutability of God, is it appropriate to approach the text with the assumption that it is at least possible for God to change? Is it possible to approach the text without any assumptions about whether or not God is immutable?

Philosophical Assumptions?

This brings us back to the question of whether an interpreter actually is approaching the text without any metaphysical or philosophical assumptions. The answer is, No. Why is this the case? Since the question of God’s immutability cannot be settled on a purely exegetical level, it follows that any given interpreter’s conclusions are not arrived at on a purely exegetical level. Rather, all

²⁸ Chisholm, 399.

exegetes assume certain things about the nature of God, and they handle the text in a manner that is consistent with those presuppositions. In itself this is not at all an inappropriate approach to the text. Indeed, it is unavoidably the case. As has been pointed out, there are some assumptions that simply must be held when approaching a text. The problem with approaches like the one advocated by Dr. Chisholm is the assumption that the question of God's immutability can be settled on purely exegetical basis, and the claim that a particular interpreter is somehow going to "allow the biblical evidence to speak for itself." This is simply not the case. If an interpreter were to approach the text of Scripture with the assumption that it is at least possible for God to lie, what in the text could be believed? If one were to approach the text with the assumption that it is at least possible for God to change, then how can God be trusted not to change His mind about His promises? The obvious response to this is that God is righteous and just. But, is not this response imposing on the text an assumption about the nature of God by assuming that God must be righteous? Is it at least possible that God is not righteous? Why is it appropriate on the one hand to assume that God changes His mind out of "love and mercy," but it is inappropriate to assume that God simply does not change? What hermeneutical principle is being employed to decide when to lay aside certain kinds of assumptions and when to employ them? The principle that seems to operative here is one's presuppositions about the nature of God, and these assumptions are necessarily philosophical.

Nevertheless, the presence and inevitability of philosophical and metaphysical presuppositions does not condemn the interpreter to eisegesis. In fact, to assume that one's presuppositions condemn one to eisegesis is itself an assumption that must, on the basis of this assumption, condemn one to eisegesis. Philosophical and metaphysical presuppositions are just as inevitable as other types of presuppositions. The question is not whether one approaches a text with philosophical and metaphysical presuppositions. Rather, the question is, Is there a way to decide whether someone's philosophy and metaphysics are right? Although it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the philosophical issues related to the nature of presuppositions and preunderstanding, suffice it to point out a few examples in which it is possible to adjudicate between these kinds of presuppositions. Certain presuppositions can be disqualified on the basis of their self-defeating nature. An interpreter can reasonably reject the presupposition that there is no absolute truth, since it is either absolutely true that there is no absolute truth, or it is only relatively true that there is no absolute truth. In either case the assumption is self-defeating and can be rejected as an unreasonable approach to the biblical text.

Certain presuppositions can be rejected on the basis of their implications. For example, an interpreter cannot approach the biblical text on the assumption that words can mean anything an author wants them to mean. Words that can mean anything mean nothing. As Aristotle said, "If . . . it be said that 'man' has an infinite number of meanings, obviously there can be no discourse; for not to have one meaning is to have no meaning, and if words have no meaning there is an end of discourse with others, and even, strictly speaking, with oneself."²⁹ The exegete must approach the text with the assumption that the biblical authors employed their language according to the principles of the lexical structure of that language in that historical context. But, these are nevertheless presuppositions.

Certain presuppositions can be rejected because they do not cohere with reality. For example, the evangelical exegete can reasonably reject the assumption that God is a liar, since this would make the interpretation of the biblical text a purely academic exercise with questionable spiritual

²⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1980), IV, iv, 1006b, 10-11, p. 167.

value. These extreme examples illustrate that simply because presuppositions are inevitable does not mean this condemns the interpreter to eisegesis, not even if these presuppositions are metaphysical in nature. Rather, proper presuppositions insure correct interpretation. Presuppositions are inevitable and unavoidable, but not all presuppositions are subjectively determined.

Exegetical Examination

Thus far we have not interacted with the exegesis of particular passages. This is because the issue cannot be settled on a purely exegetical level, and to engage in an exegetical debate without first addressing the presuppositional factors is the very point at which statements like “let the text speak for itself” become misleading. The prior consideration of one’s presuppositions must be addressed, or at least acknowledged, before there can be a profitable interaction on the exegetical level. The question of whether certain passages support mutability are predetermined by the philosophical and theological presuppositions of the interpreter.

It will perhaps be helpful to consider a few of the passages to which Dr. Chisholm appeals in his effort to argue for God’s mutability. There are a number of passages to which reference is made in his article, and a few will be considered as representative.

Jeremiah 26:4-6, “If [’im] you will not listen to Me . . . then I will make this house like Shiloh, and this city I will make a curse to all nations of the earth.”

Genesis 12:1-2, “Go [imperative] from your land . . . in order that I might make you [waw + cohortative] a great nation, bless you [waw + cohortative], and make your name great [waw + cohortative], and so that you in turn might be [waw + imperative] a blessing.’ The blessing is clearly contingent on Abram’s leaving his native land.”

Genesis 17:1-2, “. . . should be translated: ‘Walk [imperative] before Me and be [waw + imperative] blameless in order that I might ratify [waw + cohortative] My covenant between Me and you and greatly multiply [waw + cohortative] your numbers.’ Again the blessing is contingent on Abram’s obedience to the divine imperatives.”

These and the other passages lead Dr. Chisholm to conclude that statements of divine intention “which may be labeled announcements, retain a conditional element and do not necessarily bind the speaker to a stated course of action.”³⁰ The conditional aspect of announcements indicates, according to Dr. Chisholm’s interpretation, are “passages indicating that God does/will/might change His mind . . .”³¹

Is it necessary, however, to see any of these passages as indicating that God changes His mind, even if they are not taken anthropomorphically? Perhaps this can best be answered by an illustration. Students in Hebrew classes are often told by their professors, “If you study hard and memorize these principles, I promise you that you can make a passing grade on the final exam.” Now, in form, this is the same kind of statement which Dr. Chisholm classifies as contingent announcement. Clearly, the result is contingent upon the personal efforts of the students and the successful completion of the exam. However, although the outcome is contingent upon a student’s performance, the ultimate result, whether passing or failing, does not in any way denote a change

³⁰ Chisholm, 389.

³¹ Ibid., 391.

in the mind of the professor. It is always the case that a successful completion of the final exam results in a passing grade, and an unsuccessful completion of the final exam results in a failing grade. Simply because the result is contingent does not by any means indicate that the one who made the announcement has changed, or will change, or might change his mind.

Similarly, when God says, "If you will not listen to Me . . . then I will bring judgment upon you," and the recipient of this warning reverses his course of action and repents and begins to listen to God, the judgment that was promised to come upon the unrepentant is averted. However, this does not mean that God has changed His mind. In fact, God always judges the unrepentant, and He blesses the righteous, either in this life or in the life to come. It is in fact not *necessary* to understand any of these passages as indicating that God has changed His mind. Rather, a decree, announcement, promise, or what have you, is proclaimed by God the result of which is contingent on the choices and actions of the individuals to whom the proclamation is made. If the person or persons get in line with God's will, then the good results happen. If they do not get in line with God's will, then the bad results happen. But, God has not changed in the process. The unchangeable facts stand eternally the same in relation to the individual or individuals being confronted. It is always the case that God will ultimately bring good results on those who are in line with His will, and those who are outside of His will reap the bad results. If someone heeds a warning and moves out of the group of those who are outside of God's will, and into the group of those who are in God's will, then that person reaps the benefits. But, God has not changed His mind in such a scenario.

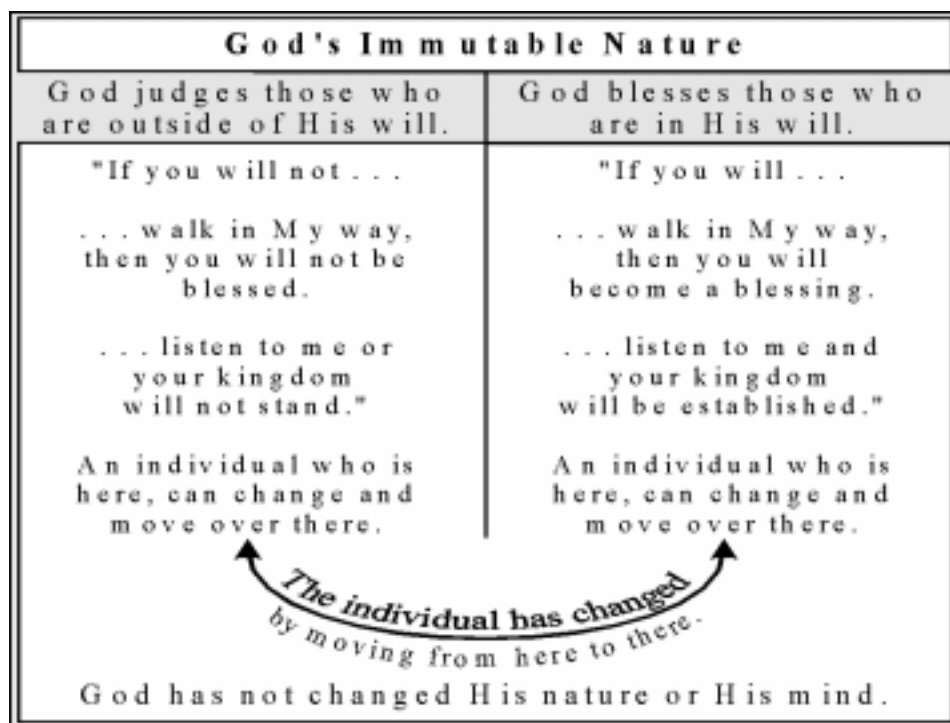


Figure 1

If Abraham *does* walk before God, then he will be blessed. If he *does not*, he will not become a blessing. It is up to Abraham whether he will or will not walk before God. But, regardless of what Abraham chooses to do, God does not change *His* mind. The contingency is precisely with men, not with God. In fact, the implications of all these passages is the unchanging faithfulness of

God to always act according to His unchanging nature. All these contingent announcements illustrate that those who are outside of God's will can be certain of ultimate judgment, and those who get in line with God's will can trust God ultimately to bring them into blessing. For God to change *His* mind would mean that suddenly God would say to Abraham something like, "No, wait! I've changed My mind. If you *do not* walk before Me, then I *will* bless you, but if you *do* walk before Me, I *will not* bless you." This would qualify as a change of mind.

When God promises judgment or blessing based on the course of action or the decision of the individual or individuals involved, the outcome is contingent upon their choices. Why is it the case that "a nation may avert His threatened judgment if it repents when confronted with its sin"³²? Not because God changes His mind, but precisely because the nation repents. It is the nation that has changed, not God, or God's mind. God withholds disaster because He never brings judgment on those who repent, but He ultimately will bring judgment on those who do not. When God promises judgment on the unrepentant, and the people repent and the judgment is averted, it is simply a matter that God is doing precisely what He has always said He would do. He will judge the unrepentant. Since they are no longer unrepentant, God does not judge them. This is not a change in God's mind. It is a change in the people. And, in fact, this is the very reason for the warning. Not to provide God the opportunity to change His mind, but to provide men with the opportunity to change their minds and their destinies. The accompanying diagram in Figure 1 is designed to illustrate this principle.

Additionally, these biblical descriptions do not necessarily have to be understood as anthropomorphisms. Rather, they can be taken phenomenologically. It is similar to referring to the rotation of the earth by such expressions as, "the sun will rise." In fact, it is not the sun that is rising. Rather, it is the earth rotating. However, from our perspective, there is an appearance of the sun rising. Consequently, the language expresses the fact according to the phenomenon as it is perceived. Similarly, it is not God changing, it is men changing. But, the language employed expresses the situation according to how it is perceived from our perspective.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the claims by many that the interpreter should allow the text to speak for itself, interpreters inevitably bring their own philosophical and metaphysical assumptions to the text and interpret the text through their interpretive framework. This is as true of Dr. Chisholm as of those who take a position contrary to his. Although Dr. Chisholm claims to have placed a proposed solution on a "firmer exegetical foundation,"³³ he has simply added his voice to a cacophony of exegetical claims that neglect to consider their own philosophical and theological assumptions and the implications of these assumptions for their interpretive conclusions. The implications of the philosophical and metaphysical assumptions which issue in the attribution of mutability to God are evidenced in Dr. Chisholm's own summary:

The texts analyzed in this section clearly show that God can and often does retract announcements. Two of the passages even regard this willingness to change His mind as one of His most fundamental attributes. In every case where a change is envisioned or reported, God *had not yet decreed a course of action or an outcome*. Instead He chose to wait patiently, *hoping* His warnings might bring people to their senses and make judgment unnecessary. (emphasis added)

³² Ibid., 397.

³³ From footnote #26.

Interpreters like Dr. Chisholm have made their own metaphysical assumptions, viz, those in favor of a temporal changing God. Such a methodology has not really allowed the text to “speak for itself.” Rather, the interpreter has spoken for the text while claiming that it is the text that is speaking. Dr. Chisholm’s changing God no longer seems to be a God who is either omniscient or sovereign. He is reduced to a temporal being whose course of action is actually only a reaction to the actions of finite human beings, and who can only *hope* that His word will accomplish the end to which it has been sent.

The history of exegesis and theology record the efforts of a multitude of theologians and Bible scholars to come to grips with this tension in the testimony of Scripture. Exegetes have often claimed to have solved this problem exegetically only to discover that someone has exposed their latent presuppositions through which they have interpreted the text. The fact that the law of non-contradiction is assumed in this ongoing debate indicates the level on which this problem must be addressed, namely, the philosophical level. It cannot be the case that the Scripture affirms both that God changes and that He does not change in the same sense. This law constrains us to resolve this tension. But, the employment of the law of non-contradiction is not a constraint upon the exegetical problem only, but upon the philosophical and theological reality as well. It cannot be the case that God both changes and does not change. Either God changes or He does not. It is ultimately the philosophical assumptions of the interpreter that will mold the approach taken in addressing this problem, and the ultimate conclusions to which he arrives. Orthodox Christian theology has maintained the theological/philosophical assumption of God’s immutability, and capable exegetes have endeavored to responsibly handled the biblical text in an effort to understand the coherence of God’s Word and God’s nature.

Exegetical contributions to this ongoing debate such as have been made by Dr. Chisholm are needed and certainly beneficial. However, those who make exegetical contributions should not do so on the misleading assumption that they are somehow free of philosophical and metaphysical assumptions, or that they have the hermeneutical/moral high ground because they are going to let the text “speak for itself.”

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