

What Does God Write in His Franklin Planner? The Paradoxes of Providence, Prophecy, and Petitionary Prayer

R. Dennis Potter

Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do. (John 14:13)

I know the end from the beginning. (Abr. 2:8)

THE DOCTRINE OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE states that God is the supreme governor of the world—past, present, and future. Different versions of the doctrine depend on different interpretations of governance. The strongest version of this doctrine comes from the Calvinists who assert that each and every event in the history of the world is planned by God and happens only because God wills it, including anything that humans do. Thomists weaken this assertion by saying that God's will concurs with our will when we act freely. And Arminians weaken the doctrine even further by asserting that, although God's will influences us and is necessary for our ability to act, it does not determine what we will do. Nevertheless, according to the Arminians, God does know *what* we will do and can include this in His plan—God has everything planned out in advance.

Mormons are not very likely to sympathize with Calvinists and are

R. DENNIS POTTER is Mormon studies coordinator for the Religious Studies Program in the Center for the Study of Ethics at Utah Valley State College where he also teaches philosophy.

not very likely to understand the Thomist view. However, they are very likely to hold something like the Arminian view. In this paper, I will argue that this view is philosophically problematic because it does not allow for substantive prophecy or petitionary prayer. Moreover, I will even suggest that it is not consistent with the most natural understanding of scripture.

Divine Foreknowledge, Correlation, and Governance

I never really caught on to this day-planner fad. I know that this makes me somewhat of a jack Mormon. After all, the eleventh commandment for Latter-day Saints is "Thou shalt correlate," and how can we correlate without a day planner? This does not mean that I don't have plans. I may be a Generation X-er, but I don't wander aimlessly through life. I even write things down on a calendar once in a while: important meetings, final exam dates, my wedding anniversary, etc. But these are usually the most important things in life and, given my long-term goals, things which are quite inevitable. This lack of planning on my part helps me to fit the stereotype of the absentminded philosopher (not an unmixed advantage), but from one perspective, it is quite the character flaw.

Being a good Wasatch Front Mormon, God has a Franklin planner and He isn't afraid to use it. Not only does He plan everything that He *can* plan, but He *can plan* everything. And so He does. Everything that happens is according to God's plan. It was meant to happen all along. This doesn't mean that God *causes* everything to happen; God can intend certain things to happen without directly causing them by knowing the precise nature of every aspect of His creation and being able to predict exactly what will occur.

So, what does God write in His Franklin planner? He writes everything that will happen. Let's call this the doctrine of divine providence. I think that this doctrine is false, not because I think God shares my character flaw, but because the idea that God plans everything winds up contradicting other assumptions which are more central to Mormon theology.

Let's be more precise about this doctrine. First of all, it entails that God knows everything that will happen before it will happen. He knows the precise time and date of your eventual death. Let's call this the doctrine of absolute foreknowledge. It is important to distinguish absolute foreknowledge from the claim that God knows everything that can possibly happen. The latter does not entail that God knows which possibility will actually obtain. Second, divine providence claims that God takes His

foreknowledge and makes a plan for each and every event in the history of the world. He knows what can happen, He knows what He wants to happen, and so He plans it to happen that way. Let's call this the doctrine of divine correlation. Third, divine providence also states that whatever will happen happens according to God's plan. It is God's will and plan that you choose to visit the washroom precisely when you do. There is no deviation from God's plan. Let's call this the doctrine of divine governance. These are not entirely separate claims. They are intertwined. They emphasize different aspects of the doctrine of divine providence. However, each claim is essential to the doctrine of divine providence as I will discuss it here.

Foreknowledge, Free Will, and Prophecy

Three doctrines create problems for various aspects of divine providence. I will call these free will, prophecy, and petitionary prayer respectively. The doctrine of free will states that, with respect to some things we do, we have a choice—i.e., it is possible for us to choose otherwise than we do. The doctrine of prophecy states that God uses His knowledge of what will happen to inform us through prophets what will happen with the idea of changing what we will do. And the doctrine of petitionary prayer is that our prayers can make a difference.

I claim that each of these doctrines is found in scripture. Lehi says we are “free to choose liberty and eternal life, through the great Mediator of all men, or to choose captivity and death” (2 Ne. 2:27). So there is at least one free choice that we can make. Moreover, it is clear from the Book of Mormon that many prophecies are for the purpose of changing human hearts (e.g., Hel. 4:14–15). Finally, God sends an angel to Alma the younger as a result of the prayers of Alma the elder (Mosiah 27:14). There may be some twisted and convoluted ways that such scriptures can be interpreted to avoid these doctrines, but the most plausible and most common interpretation of such scriptures commits us to the above doctrines. And yet these doctrines are inconsistent with divine providence.

Let's start with the most obvious one: absolute foreknowledge. If we are free with respect to some actions, then God cannot have complete foreknowledge. For if God has such foreknowledge, then He not only knows what we will do but He knows that we do it freely. Moreover, He knows each and every detail that leads up to each and every event. These facts make it impossible for us to actually be free. To see this, consider the

“Case of Sariah at Sunstone.” In this scenario, God is having a correlation committee meeting just about the time of the first Egyptian Pharaoh. The meeting is intended for planning Sariah’s actions on August 2, 2000. He writes in His Franklin planner as follows: “Sariah freely chooses to attend the Sunstone Symposium. A tornado strikes the Marriott Hotel. And everyone except Sariah escapes alive.” Now one of God’s angels is not as careful as He should be, and the Sariah edition of God’s Franklin planner ends up in the library of the University of Utah. On July 4th, Sariah, an unpatriotic professor of philosophy, finds the planner that describes every detail of her boring academic life. It even gives an account of her finding the planner in the library. She finds that the last entry of the planner is on August 2, 2000. She reads what it says about her untimely death.

Now the question is whether she can deviate from the plan. Indeed, it doesn’t even need to be a plan. God writes down what He knows is going to happen. Sariah is certainly going to want to avoid death if she can. So, she will try to avoid the symposium. But if the planner is right, and it must be, then she will be at the symposium. So it seems that she is not free to avoid attending Sunstone. But if she is not free, then the planner is wrong after all, since it says that she freely attends the symposium. On the other hand, suppose she can avoid the symposium. If she does, then the planner is wrong as well. Either way we have a contradiction: the planner must be right and yet it is wrong.

How can we get out of this paradox? We have assumed the following:

- (1) God has absolute foreknowledge.
- (2) We are free with respect to some actions.
- (3) God can tell people about what He knows about the future (whether through a book or through verbal communication).
- (4) Knowing what God believes about the future may affect what we will want to do.

And from these assumptions the contradiction follows. Clearly, if we find out about our untimely deaths, then we will want to avoid them. So (4) is fairly plausible. That leaves (3) as the only candidate for avoiding the paradox if we are to preserve absolute foreknowledge and free will. But (3) is entailed by the doctrine of prophecy. So, it seems that we cannot affirm absolute foreknowledge, free will, and prophecy without contradicting ourselves.

It is important to notice that this argument does not presuppose that God *causes* Sariah’s action. And so pointing out that the existence of

God's foreknowledge does not cause us to act in a certain way is not a response to this argument. Moreover, even accepting a compatibilist view of free agency will not get us out of the problem. Even if Sariah's ability to do other than she does causally depends on her internal mental state, it should be clear that she is not free in the sense that, if she wants to, then she can avoid the symposium. Indeed, reading the book will cause her to *want* to avoid Sunstone.

A more plausible line of response argues that God can tell us about some future events, but just not all of them. The idea is that, although in Sariah's case knowing about the future will change the way she will act (thus leading to the paradox), in many cases knowing something about the future will *not* change the way we will act. God can tell us about those future facts that will not affect the way anyone will act even if they know about them. There are two problems with this response, however. The first problem is that any fact might be one that will, if known, affect the actions of someone. If we knew all of the consequences of our actions, we would certainly almost always act differently than we do. Practically everything that happens is something that *someone* will regret. So, this leaves God with very little to inform us about.

The second problem is worse yet. Even if there are some things left in the category of things that God can inform us about, they cannot be things that will have an effect on how we will act. This means that God cannot inform us of the future in order to have an effect on how we will act. But such a situation denies the doctrine of prophecy explained above. Certainly God tells prophets about the future to affect what we will do.

The defender of absolute foreknowledge might object that I am misunderstanding how foreknowledge functions causally in time. To see this point we should consider time travel, the objector will insist. Time travel may seem to lead to paradoxes. For example, if I could time travel, then I could go back and kill my grandfather. However, philosopher David Lewis has suggested how we can avoid the grandfather's paradox.¹ Clearly, my existence rules out that my grandfather dies before he begets my father. So, if I travel back in time before he begets my father, then there must have been some historical event that prevented me from killing my grandfa-

1. David Lewis, "The Paradoxes of Time Travel," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13 (1976): 145–52.

ther. Let's say I slipped on a banana peel. No matter how many times I go back, something similar will happen.

The case of foreknowledge is similar. It is just that what travels back in time is a piece of information, not a person. This information can do nothing to make what happens before the time that it refers to different than it was. Instead, it can be involved only in the very causal chain that leads to what in fact happened. So, for example, if Sariah finds out that she will be killed at Sunstone, this fact must be involved in some way in bringing it about that she freely goes to Sunstone. Or, at least, it cannot be involved in preventing her from attending Sunstone.

This is subtle stuff. But I think in the subtlety a fallacy hides. Time travel and foreknowledge are disanalogous in the following way: we cannot change the past but we can change the future. If we are free, then what we do will have an effect on what happens in the future. However, even if we are free, what we do will have no effect on the past. What does the defender of absolute foreknowledge do with the fact that Sariah will want to avoid Sunstone? He claims that it doesn't keep her from attending Sunstone. But surely it does, since she is free to do as she wills, and since preserving her own life would be of paramount interest to her!

Of course, this argument raises the issue of whether the future and the past are really disanalogous in this respect. Perhaps we can affect the past. If one assumes that there is such a thing as backwards causation, then one might think that there is another way out of the problem that I have posed. But this is not necessarily true. We must affirm something much stronger than backwards causation. There are two theses that we could affirm about our control over the past. The first is that we have the power to bring about things in the past. That is, we have the power to be involved in a cause whose effect has occurred earlier in time. This condition does not allow for the compatibility of free will and foreknowledge, because free will entails not only that we have the power to *do* something but that we have the power to *refrain* from doing it. Thus, it requires, in effect, that we have the power to make the past different than it was. "Weak" backwards causation claims that we have the power to bring about something in the past, but not that we have the power to make the past different than it was. "Strong" backwards causation claims that we have the power to bring about an event in the past where the event is the way it was or where the event is the way it was not. If I have a real choice as to what to do, then I presently have the power to produce either X or not-X. If I cause

God to believe this in the past, then I have the power to bring it about that God believes that I do X, and I also have the power to bring it about that God believes that I do not-X. This is obviously strong backwards causation and not weak. If God knows what is going to happen due to weak backwards causation, then we are not free. This is because we can only cause Him to believe what He in fact already believed. So, we can only do what He in fact already believed that we would do.

As a matter of fact, I think that weak backwards causation is perfectly possible. However, strong backwards causation is not possible. The reason it is not possible is that it violates the rule that we cannot change the past. And when this rule is violated, we run into the traditional paradoxes of time travel. If I can alter the past, then I could cause something to happen which would prevent my birth.²

Divine Correlation and Petitionary Prayer

The doctrine of petitionary prayer says that our prayers can have an effect on what God will do. It is hard to reconcile this idea with the doctrine of divine correlation, i.e., that God plans what is going to happen before it happens. The problem is that God makes His plans long before we pray. So, our prayers cannot have an effect on what plans He makes. Consider a concrete case. Ann's husband has stage four colon cancer. She prays to God that he will be cured. Now aeons before she kneels down to pray, God has already written down in His Franklin planner whether her husband will be cured or not. So, how could Ann's prayer have an effect on God's plan regarding her husband's life? Indeed, why should she even pray? God already knows what He is going to do; her prayer, it would seem, cannot make any difference.

The traditional response to this problem is what I will call the internal response. This response says that, although Ann's prayer cannot affect what God will do, it does affect her relationship with God. It brings her to God and affects her moral disposition. That is, Ann's prayer is not sup-

2. David Lewis has pointed out that time travel is perfectly consistent, despite the traditional paradoxes. (Ibid.) All we have to affirm is the claim that we cannot change the past. So, whatever we do when we go back has already happened. This means that time travel could not be used to alter history. And so the plots of many excellent science fiction stories based on this paradox will have to go out the philosophical window.

posed to have any external effects but is only supposed to have internal ones.

The internal response does not allow for robust petitionary prayer. Robust petitionary prayer is the doctrine that says that the way in which petitionary prayer makes a difference is external. The idea is that we pray because we believe that praying will make a real difference in the world and not just because of what it does to us. There may be several ways that prayer can make a difference in the world. Perhaps it can be like “casting a spell” in that it directly causes something to happen without the intervention of any other agent. On the other hand, it could affect what happens by convincing an agent, like God, to do something. Either way, the difference that prayer makes is external to the person doing the praying. I assume that Mormons believe in robust petitionary prayer. At least, the prayers that we utter when we heal the sick have a real effect, we think. So, the internal response is not enough.

Another response is the one given by St. Thomas Aquinas. He argues that God has planned out everything in advance, so God must have planned our prayers as well. God plans to have certain things come about as a result of our praying. There are several problems with this. First, it is not clear that it allows us to be free to pray or not pray. But that aside, it also fails to explain why God would do such a thing. Why are the “prayer-caused” events “prayer-caused” and the others are not? Finally, Aquinas’s theory does not really seem to allow for robust petitionary prayer. The problem is that the ultimate cause of God’s doing what He does when we pray is God’s planning it and not our affecting how He plans it by deciding to pray. In one sense, we affect what God does: He chooses to have our prayers be the occasion of His doing something that He had planned to do. But it does not seem that Aquinas’s account allows for our prayers to be the deciding factor in bringing something about.

Philosopher Elenore Stump has offered a theory of petitionary prayer that allows for robust petitionary prayer in some cases.³ The basic idea is that, if God decides that He is willing to do certain things only in the event that we ask Him to, then things will be better than if He always gave us everything we need. An analogy will help. Take a teacher and a pupil. The teacher could just give the pupil everything he needs. But then he

3. Elenore Stump, “Petitionary Prayer,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16 (April 1979): 81–91.

would be spoiled. It is better for him to learn to ask for what he needs. The same applies to God, Stump claims. This is because we are supposed to have a significant relationship with God. Making it so that we can affect what God will do in some cases allows for such a significant relationship. Moreover, it will keep us from being spoiled. It will teach us faith, and it will help us to come to God with other things besides petitions.

Surely there is something right about Stump's theory. Moreover, it does seem to allow for robust petitionary prayer to some extent. But the problem is determining that extent. It seems that, in cases where the way God decides to act will make a huge moral difference, our prayers can have no effect, according to Stump's theory. This is because, in Stump's view, the net good gained from the fact that if we don't pray to God then God will not do X must outweigh any net good lost from the fact that God won't do X. But if God's doing X can make things very much better than they would be otherwise, then it is not clear that the moral calculus would allow Him to be affected by prayer in this case. To see this with a concrete analogy, imagine that the pupil is doing something that will endanger his life. Shouldn't the teacher help him even without his asking her to do so? Hence, Stump's theory allows petitionary prayer only where the outcome does not make a significant moral difference in the world. This seems very odd indeed. Wouldn't we think that we should pray about the most important things and not the least important things?

One might think that most Mormons do not have to contend with the problems of petitionary prayer. Indeed, many Mormons deny God's absolute foreknowledge. And the idea is that, if God does not have absolute foreknowledge, then we can make sense out of His changing His mind about what to do (not, of course, changing His mind about the principle upon which to act). If we can affect His plans, generally speaking, then we should be able to affect Him in our prayers as well. So, there is no problem with robust petitionary prayer.

However, the appearance of a solution here is deceptive, I think. The problem is that God still has more knowledge than we do about what will happen, what is happening, and what has happened. He is, by far, a better judge than we are about what should happen. And He should bring this about. If we pray to Him to ask for something, our prayer surely cannot affect His deliberations for two reasons. First, He already knows about any problems that we might propose He fix. Second, He already knows whether they should be fixed or not (given His best judgment). Now, we

might do something that will change His plans. For example, the Nephites might repent and avert their destruction. But if it seems, from God's inordinately better perspective, that Sodom and Gomorrah should be destroyed, then how could Abraham's prayers have any effect on God's action?

One might think that, by praying, we enable God to do something that He would not have been able to do otherwise. Then we can make sense out of how our petitionary prayers can affect God, since God has new options open to Him as a result of our prayers. Let's call this the enabling theory. And it is plausible that we can enable God to do things that He otherwise could not do, since, for example, only we can do what is necessary to enable God to exalt us. By virtue of our free agency, we are able to empower God to reward us.

However, this solution to the problem is also problematic for two reasons. First, it seems that, when we engage in petitionary prayer, we are praying for help with what we cannot ourselves do. We are powerless to do anything, so we turn to God who has more power. But, on the enabling theory, God is powerless with respect to something until we pray. This seems to put things backwards. Second, what is the mechanism by which we give God this power to do what He otherwise could not do? Some may argue that it is by a show of faith on our part that God is allowed to help us. But then this sounds an awful lot like Stump's theory, which we have already rejected.

It seems that we petition in prayer because we want God to do something that He can do and that we cannot do. He is more powerful than human beings. But, on the other hand, by the very act of petitioning, it seems that we assume that we can have an effect on what He decides to do. Since God is not whimsical, our ability to affect God cannot be that we merely persuade him to prefer to do what we want to do rather than what He knows is the best thing to do. God will do what is best regardless. So, if we truly affect by our prayers what God will do, then we must persuade him that what we want is the best. If God is persuaded, then He is rightly persuaded. So, we must rightly persuade God. But people are rightly persuaded only when they find out something they did not know, or they see a logical consequence that they did not formerly see. Surely God can and does see any logical consequences that we see. So, it seems that we must tell God something that He doesn't already know. But this seems absurd.

I argue that it is not absurd. God may know our hearts and our per-

sonalities. But He doesn't necessarily always know what we desire in the moment. This is not to say that He *couldn't* know what we currently desire. Indeed, it seems very likely that He can just decide to "inspect" our hearts and know what we want. But having a capacity to do something and having done it are two different things. One way that we can ensure that God knows what we desire is to pray and tell him. And when He learns of our desires, He can modify His plans accordingly. Indeed, what we desire will have an effect on what the overall best outcome will be. So, it will have an effect on what God should do. Therefore, if we can inform God of our desires through our prayers, then our prayers can affect what God plans to do. Let's call this the information theory. We give God some information that He needs.

Now this is quite a radical theory, I admit. There are three objections to this theory that are fairly substantive. The first objection is that the theory seems parochial. After all, some people pray and others do not. So, it would seem that this theory would entail that only those who pray will be considered in the plan. But this would not seem fair. There are two responses to this objection. First, the information theory does not rule out God's finding out about the desires of others as well. It only rules out that God already knows everyone's desires automatically. Second, even if this theory does mean that God will take into account the desires of those who pray more than others, this fact is not necessarily a bad thing. After all, those who pray are thereby more righteous than those who don't. They are more deserving of reward.

Another objection to the information theory is that it seems to deny God's omniscience. But omniscience is a tricky and complicated thing. We might define omniscience in the following way. God is omniscient if and only if God knows everything. But this is an ambiguous definition. What counts as "everything"? What is true may change with time. If this is right, then what God knows will also change as well. For example, at the time of writing this, it is now true that I am typing. But at the time you are reading these words, it is not true that I am typing (or at least, if I *am* typing, it is other words). Moreover, many people—Aristotle and myself included—believe that the future is vague. What is true about the future is not yet decided. So, if "everything" includes only what is true at a given time, then we need to modify the definition: God is omniscient at *T* if, and only if, God knows every truth that is true at *T*. This definition would allow God to be omniscient and yet not know what will happen in the fu-

ture: As of a given moment, there is nothing that will happen in the future.

But then it still seems that God's omniscience, according to this modified definition, would continue to rule out the information theory. This is because the information theory presupposes that God does not know something which is true right now—namely, that I desire such and such. This is right. Still the definition remains ambiguous in a certain way. Knowledge can be occurrent or latent. What this means is that knowledge can be present before my mind or just in storage, so to speak. So, for example, until I pointed it out, you were not thinking about whether or not you were naked. Now you are thinking about it. But you knew all along, in some sense, that you were not naked. This is the sense of latent knowledge. I want to argue that we should define God's knowledge in terms of what is latent knowledge for Him. So, God is omniscient at *T* if, and only if, God latently knows every truth that is true at *T*. By praying we make God's latent knowledge occurrent—i.e., present before His mind and under His current consideration.

Of course, one may object that all of God's knowledge surely is occurrent. Everything is present before Him constantly and perpetually. But I reject this view as being inconsistent with the Mormon view of God. We think that God is literally an embodied person. He reasons, deliberates, becomes angry, considers options, etc. These thought processes make no sense at all if everything is always before His mind. Thought process requires that what was latent becomes occurrent.⁴

The Open God, Theology, and Scripture

So far, I have argued that God does not have absolute foreknowledge and that He does not have the occurrent knowledge of our present desires and aspirations for the future. This view of God contradicts the view advocated by the doctrine of divine providence. In that view, God plans everything out to the last detail. The future is not open from God's perspective. But in the view of God that I am advocating here, the future is open to God in more ways than one. It is open because He does not know which

4. We might also argue that, since God is embodied, what He knows is finite because embodiment implies that the mind is matter. If the mind is made of matter, then information takes up space, and any body, even an eternal one, has only a finite amount of space in it.

of the various possibilities will be realized. It is also open because He is open to being persuaded about what plans He should make as to what should be done. I argue that the doctrines of free will, prophecy, and petitionary prayer force us to accept this conception of an open God.

Now, someone might argue that this conception of God is unsatisfactory even if it is the most philosophically satisfying. This is because it does not accurately describe the God of the scriptures. In this brief and final section, I want to argue that this objection is wrong. First, I will give an example from the Old Testament that I read as implying that the purpose of prophecy is to allow people to change their minds and hence change what the future will be. Second, I will give an example that makes it clear that God changes His mind about what to do as the result of someone praying.

The story of King Ahab goes as follows (1 Kgs. 22). Ahab wants to know whether he should go into battle against Aram at Ramothgilead. He consults a slew of prophets who say that he will be victorious. But then he consults another prophet, Micaiah, who initially predicts success and then, when pressed, changes his prediction to failure. Micaiah further adds that the Lord had planned to entice Ahab to battle at Ramothgilead so that he would be destroyed. To accomplish this goal, God had planned to tell him (through the prophets) that he would be victorious. The king decides to go to battle even with this information. He disguises himself but is still killed by a stray arrow.

There are several difficulties with this story. One is that, if God had truly planned to deceive Ahab with prophets, then why would He also send Micaiah? Is Micaiah telling the truth or not? If so, then God's plan is foiled by Micaiah. Micaiah says that he is telling the truth and that he is supposed to be the only prophet with the truth (from the point of view of the author). Second, this situation leads to the same paradox as in the story of Sariah at Sunstone. It seems clear that Micaiah is giving King Ahab the chance to opt out of the path that will lead to his destruction. But if the king decides not to go to battle, then what Micaiah has told him will no longer accurately describe future events. All of these problems with the text can be solved with a very simple and natural interpretation of it. God sees that King Ahab's pride is leading him to a battle that will destroy him. He purposely sends lying prophets to him who will feed his pride and facilitate his downfall if he believes them. But He leaves Ahab a way out. If Ahab is humble enough to question his own abilities to win the

battle and the slew of prophets predicting victory, then he can find out the real truth about what will happen if he goes to battle. King Ahab takes this option, learns the truth about what will happen, but is still prideful enough that he goes into battle. Ahab tempts his own fate.

According to this interpretation, the true prophecy is conditional. It tells what will happen *if* Ahab doesn't repent. The prophecy does not tell us what *will* happen. So, God's plan is conditional and not set in stone. God's plan is such that if Ahab believes those who flatter him, then he will be destroyed; but if he believes Micaiah and sees that he should not go to battle, then he will not be destroyed. And God gives Ahab a glance into a possible future for much the same reason that the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come gives Scrooge a vision of his own tombstone: so that Scrooge can avoid what might happen otherwise.

According to this view, God is open. He "pencils" in His appointments in His Franklin planner. To see that this is the correct view of the role of prophecy, consider Jeremiah 18:7-10 (NRSV):

If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from evil, I will repent of the evil that I intended to do to it.

And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will repent of the good which I have intended to do to it.

The second Old Testament story is even more familiar than the one about Ahab and Micaiah. In Genesis 18, Abraham prays to the Lord and convinces him not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah as long as there are a certain number of righteous people. He even appears to bargain with the Lord about how many righteous people it should take to make Sodom worthy of being spared His wrath. God agrees with him. On the face of it, this appears to be a story where Abraham convinces God to do differently than He has planned.

Of course, the objection on the part of the defender of divine providence is that God knows all along that He will spare Sodom if there are at least ten righteous. And Abraham is only "convincing" God to do what He already plans to do. But this makes nonsense out of the story. God comes to Abraham and not the other way around. So, if God is not reacting to what Abraham is saying, then what is the purpose of the conversation? I would argue that the purpose of this conversation is not unlike the

purpose of everyday conversations. Our relationship with God is unsurprisingly not unlike our relationships with our own parents. We plead for mercy, and we sometimes get it. This is the picture of God in the Bible, and the reading of these passages only becomes strained when we try to force these passages into the framework constructed by the advocate of divine providence. The resulting style of biblical interpretation is the philosophy of men mingled with scripture at its best (or, rather, its worst).

Conclusion

If God is not certain about what will happen, and if His day planner is written in pencil, then how can we have faith in Him? How can we devote ourselves entirely to a project that we cannot be sure will succeed? The concept of faith tacit in these questions is one that presupposes certainty. If I have faith in something, then I am unwavering. Nothing can undermine my faith. This is the faith that Joseph F. Smith says “confirms and strengthens us and establishes beyond a question or doubt.”⁵

But this view of faith is not the only one. Alma’s concept of faith is different in that it does not require certainty but a mere “desire to believe” (Alma 32:27). It is not a faith of unflinching belief and security, but a faith that takes a leap. It is a faith that is willing to experiment to see if the “seed” planted is one that will “bring forth fruit” or one that “groweth not” (Alma 32:28, 32, 38).

It is a faith that will face the risk of life with optimism. William James’s description of faith harmonizes with Alma’s:

Suppose that the world’s author put the case to you before creation, saying: “I am going to make a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own level best. I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join in the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk?”⁶

It may be that many people need the faith that Joseph F. Smith re-

5. *Teachings of the Presidents of the Church: Joseph F. Smith* (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1998), 50.

6. William James, *Pragmatism* (1907; edited with an introduction by Bruce Kuklick, Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1981), 130.

quired. If so they are unlikely to be persuaded by any of these arguments, however logically flawless they might prove to be. But for those who, like Alma and James, enjoy a risky faith—the faith of the spiritual gambler—there is an alternative to divine providence in the doctrine of an open God. And this doctrine is more logically consistent with several of Mormonism’s most central tenets. This is the kind of faith that I enjoy. So, although I don’t mind if God “pencils me in,” I’m also glad that he’s got an eraser.