1 Sources of Providentialism

> The Christianizing of providence came at a cost; its reconciling power would henceforth carry the moral ambiguities of an omnipotent divine will answerable for its purposes.[1]

1.1 Hinterland of Ancient Philosophy

To set the scriptural account of providence in context, some initial comparison with the thought of the ancient world is required.[2] The term 'providence' itself (*providentia* in Latin, *pronoia* in Greek) is imported from the philosophy of Plato and the Stoics, where its development can already be discerned. While the Epicureans denied providence and Aristotle restricted it to the heavenly regions, both Plato and the Stoics viewed it more comprehensively and favourably. As we shall see, the adaptation of providence in the early church largely represents a modified form of its expressions in Platonism and Stoicism. In addition, many of the philosophical arguments relating to human freedom and the presence of evil in the world would reappear in subsequent Christian theology.[3]

[1] Genevieve Lloyd, *Providence Lost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 149.

[2] For a valuable overview of providence in ancient philosophy, see Myrto Dragona-Monachou, 'Divine providence in the philosophy of the empire', *Aufsteig und Niedergang der Römischen Welt, Teil II*, 36.7 (1994), 4417–90.

[3] These include evil as necessary, pedagogical, retributive, instrumental, incidental by-product, or the result of voluntary agencies. See A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 332.

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For Plato, there is a natural order to the world which is attributed to the gods. This is a theme of the *Timaeus* with its account of cosmic order, though even here there is a sense in which the gods themselves are acting in accordance with some deeper natural necessity by which they are bound. Despite an imprecision in its account of the relations between reason, the world soul and the demiurge, the theology of Plato's later *Dialogues*, especially the *Laws*, moves towards affirming a divine providence that governs the cosmos and human beings. This is rational, spiritual and godlike.[4] Much of the discussion in Book X of the *Laws* argues that the gods must care not only for the general order of the world but also for the affairs of human beings. A wise ruler will attend to the details and order these according to the principles of justice for the good of the whole. This requires attention to all the parts.

> Let us not, then, deem God inferior to human workmen, who, in proportion to their skill, finish and perfect their works, small as well as great, by one and the same art; or that God, the wisest of beings, who is both willing and able to take care, is like a lazy good-for-nothing, or a coward, who turns his back upon labour and gives no thought to smaller and easier matters, but to the greater only.[5]

Given the proximity of this idea to the teaching of Jesus on the Sermon on the Mount, it is not hard to see why the theologians of the early church often perceived the Platonists as their allies in this and other matters. 'There are none who come nearer to us than the Platonists.'[6]

[4] See Robert Mayhew, 'The theology of the *Laws*' in Christopher Bobonich (ed.), *Plato's 'Laws': A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 197–216.

[5] Plato, *Laws*, 10.902e–903a. Citation from Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (eds.), *Collected Dialogues of Plato, Vol. IV* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 474.

[6] Augustine, *City of God*, 8.5, cited from the translation by Henry Bettenson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 304.

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For the Stoics, whose theology is generally pantheistic, materialist and impersonal, this is extended to a single cosmic organisation by which all things are ruled. Although there are differences among the Stoics as to the degree of determinism entailed by this vision, it is agreed that human life is best lived by submission and acceptance of these cosmic laws, which are evident from a contemplation of the universe and the destiny of human beings. God, nature and fate are closely aligned by the Stoic philosophers; these can be identified as constituting a single force by which all events are determined. This position is evident in the extant writings and comments on Stoic thinkers from Cleanthes and Chrysippus onwards. While some outcomes are co-fated by our will, even these seem to be predetermined. This is argued on the basis of three types of claim: a metaphysics of sufficient reason; a logical commitment to causal pre-determinism as the only alternative to the positing of uncaused events; and the empirical observation of both organic unity in the world and the seeming success of divination.[7]

In Plato, the cosmos is likened to a single organism, whose movements, interacting elements and actions are ordered according to an idealised plan. Hence seemingly discordant elements can, from a more distant perspective, be viewed as belonging to a harmonious pattern. Against Epicurean notions of chance and randomness, the Stoics developed this Platonic account of providence by deploying an organic metaphor. The gods are unified and identified with a world soul or reason (*logos*) that is the animating and controlling principle of the cosmos.[8] As rational and ensouled, the cosmos is ordered by laws which govern its functions. The virtuous person, a microcosm of the whole, is the one who will accept and adopt the order of nature in their being. While Stoic thinkers could differ on

[7] This is argued in A. A. Long and D. N. Sedley, *The Hellenistic Philosophers*, vol. 1, p. 343.

[8] See for example Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 46–7.

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how freedom is to be constructed on this model, they tended to view the happy life as one which recognises and internalises the cosmic order. Identified with an impersonal fate, the harmony and purpose of the world impose on us so that our only significant choice is to align ourselves with it.

Some Stoic philosophers, such as Chrysippus, offer softer forms of determinism in which individual choices are influenced but not wholly fixed by antecedent conditions. Stoicism clearly faced some major challenges in this area arising from the dominance of its organic model.[9] Yet Stoic choice should not be regarded as passive submission to an external force – we might better construe it as a patient acceptance of one's nature and one's place in the wider scheme of things. The Stoic cosmopolitan ideal situates the human person in the earthly city, as one committed to its common good. To identify oneself with one's natural fate is to go with the flow of the world; in this respect, Stoic ethics can be liberating and emotionally fulfilling. 'The acceptance of necessity lends a grace and smoothness of movement that is lacking in the rough actions of the wise.'[10]

In his *Didaskalikos*, Alcinous provides a benchmark for the Middle Platonist position. Writing in the second century CE, he offers a standard account of providence which is set apart from Stoic philosophy in ways that can also be detected among Christian thinkers in the east. Fate is only a general law that operates conditionally. The natural consequences of particular decisions are determined, but the content of the decision is down to human freedom rather than fate. So Alcinous can hold that, while everything is bounded by fate, not everything is fated. 'Fate consists rather in the fact that if a soul chooses a given type of life and performs such-and-such actions such-and-such consequences will follow for

[9] See David Furley, 'Cosmology' in Leimpe Algra, Jonathan Barnes, Jaap Mansfeld and Malcolm Schofield (eds.), *Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 412–51.

[10] Genevieve Lloyd, *Providence Lost* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p. 96.

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it.'[11] This hypothetical character of fate is an aspect of providence that is prevalent in Middle Platonism. Alcinous elucidates it further by adapting an Aristotelian distinction between the 'possible' and the 'potential'. The possible is undetermined by nature since it requires the operation of the free will to become determinate. By contrast, the potential describes a capacity that will eventually be realised, as a boy will become a flautist or a scholar or a carpenter.[12]

A blending of Plato's account of providence with Judaism appears in Philo's *De Providentia*, a first-century work that adumbrates much Christian reflection on this topic. Surviving in Armenian and the Greek fragments of Eusebius, the treatise attests a divine providence that disposes of the world in such a way that the righteous are rewarded and the wicked punished. In this sense, their actions are ruled by God's providence, though not caused by it, with respect to their free decisions to comply with or to resist God's law. Philo's sense of providence pervades his entire theology on account of its links with the concepts of God and creation. Here Platonic themes are allied to Jewish theological convictions. The power and wisdom of God entail providential oversight, just as the maintenance and direction of creation are governed by divine care. This includes the history of individuals and nations, which are overruled by the justice of God.[13]

Plotinus blends several ideas from Platonism and Stoicism in his account of providence in the third *Ennead*. While maintaining the causal significance of human freedom, he also argues that the sensible world is ordered in all its details according to rational principles. This is not the result of the intention of a divine agency, but rather a consequence of the world's participation in the reason from which it emanates. Even in the material world, far removed from the One,

[11] Alcinous, *Handbook of Platonism*, ed. John Dillon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 35.

[12] For commentary on the use of this distinction, see Dillon in ibid., p. 164.

[13] For further discussion, see Peter Frick, *Divine Providence in Philo of Alexandria* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

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there is a providential ordering which is described through a series of analogies with the healthy body, a play of contrasting characters, and a musical score with discordant notes. Evil has no independent reality apart from its contribution to an enriched whole; in itself it can only be seen as deficient in goodness.

> We are like people who know nothing about the art of painting and criticise the painter because the colours are not beautiful everywhere, though he has really distributed the appropriate colours to every place; and cities are not composed of citizens with equal rights, even those which have good laws and constitutions; or we are like someone who censures a play because all the characters in it are not heroes but there is a servant and a yokel who speaks in a vulgar way; but the play is not a good one if one expels the inferior characters, because they too help to complete it.[14]

Plotinus' portrayal of divine providence has a powerful emotional and spiritual appeal. Although his influence upon subsequent Christian thinkers was sporadic, nevertheless as representative of Platonism his work points to ways in which Christian theology could be harmonised with philosophy.[15] While insisting upon the place of human freedom, he discerns a majestic harmony in the profusion of material things and in the diversity of characteristics. Even evil, suffering and base deeds are finally given their fitting place in the total scheme of the universe which reflects the reason and goodness of its source and final end.

For classical philosophy then, the concept of 'providence' increasingly plays a vital role for understanding both God and the world. In designating a spiritual and moral order, divine superintendence and a circumscribed freedom, providence became an indispensable

[14] Plotinus, *Ennead*, 3.2.11. Citation from A. H. Armstrong translation in Loeb Classic Library edn (London: Heinemann, 1967), pp. 79–80.

[15] See John Rist, 'Plotinus and Christian philosophy' in Lloyd P. Gerson (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 386–414.

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theme for thinking of the cosmos and the place of human beings in relation to God. The concept was also closely implicated in discussions surrounding human responsibility, sin, evil and creaturely destiny.

1.2 Scripture

As already noted, the word 'providence' does not itself feature in the Hebrew Bible or the Greek New Testament with reference to God, although we begin to see the emergence of the term in the Septuagint, and especially in the later deutero-canonical works. The verb προνοέω and the noun πρόνοια appear nine times each in the Septuagint. For example, the Wisdom of Solomon and 3 & 4 Maccabees reflect on divine πρόνοια, in ways that anticipate the reflections of early church writers on the subject. By divine providence, a frail wooden vessel can make its ways across the seas (Wisdom 14:3), thus suggesting a wise ordering of creation.[16] Commentators discern here the influence of Platonic and Stoic terminology. At 3 Maccabees 4:21, which speaks of an invincible providence, the stress falls on a particular divine overruling of human wickedness by which the exiled Jews in Egypt are preserved. This sense of overruling is repeated at 5:30. A divine and all-wise providence is affirmed at 4 Maccabees 13:19 with respect to the affection of family ties, as is the providence by which the death of the martyrs preserves Israel (17:22). The closest approximation to the term 'providence' in the Hebrew Bible is the term *providebit* in the Latin Vulgate translation of Genesis 22:8. The Hebrew root is the verb 'to see' (*r'h*), which carries a sense of divine involvement and resolution, rather than merely viewing from afar.[17]

[16] The conceptual background in classical philosophy is noted by David Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon*, Anchor Bible vol. XLIII (New York: Doubleday, 1979), p. 265.

[17] See W. Schotroff, 'R'h – to see' in Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (eds.), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. III (Peabody, MA: Henrickson, 1990), pp. 1176–83.

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Here Abraham assures Isaac that the Lord will provide (i.e. see to) a sacrifice.[18]

In the New Testament, πρόνοια appears just twice, and in connection only with human foresight (Acts 24:2; Romans 13:14). The verb, προνοέω, is also confined to human activity (Romans 12:17; 2 Corinthians 8:21; and 1 Timothy 5:8). Nevertheless, we can identify other terms which have close conceptual links with divine providence. These include the verb 'to foreknow' (προγινώσκω), of which there are five occurrences (Acts 26:5; Romans 8:20, 11:2; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:17), and the noun foreknowledge (πρόγνωσις), which occurs twice (Acts 2:23; 1 Peter 1:2). A further notion with providential links is οἰκονομία, denoting stewardship, administration or plan.[19] With its stress on breadth and comprehension, this is used with some theological significance at Ephesians 1:10, 3:2 and 3:9, and Colossians 1:25 to signify a single overarching plan, hidden and mysterious, that is being worked out cosmically, historically and now ecclesially.[20] Similarly, the term βουλή (counsel, purpose) also denotes a divine strategy with strong providential overtones (Acts 2:23, 4:28, 5:38, 13:36; Ephesians 1:11; Hebrews 6:17). These related themes express a divine ordering of nature and history 'in which all things hold together' (Colossians 1:17). The historical enactment of

[18] Within later Judaism, the scope of God's activity could be viewed as providential although specific terms for providence emerged only in medieval discussions, largely through translation of Arabic concepts. The distinction between *hanhagah* and *hashgachah* corresponds to that between general governance and individual acts of providence. See Alexander Altmann, 'Providence: in medieval Jewish philosophy' in Fred Skolnik (ed.), *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2nd edn (2007), vol. XVI, pp. 649–51.

[19] This range of meanings is reflected in the different English renditions of οἰκονομία. For linguistic analysis see Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians: Word Bible Commentary*, vol. XLII (Dallas: Word Book, 1990), p. 32. In using the term οἰκονομία to refer to his own ministry in Colossians 1:25, Paul appears to signify his own providential locus in the spread of the gospel. See Paul Foster, *Colossians* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), p. 221.

[20] Christopher R. Seitz notes the providential connotations of Colossians 1:15–20 with its extensional sense of the gospel. See *Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2014), p. 91.

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a single divine purpose is then developed in patristic theology and in the church's *regula fidei*.

Hence, notwithstanding the infrequency of πρόνοια in Scripture, there is a profusion of materials that point us to different forms of divine provision, care and purpose.[21] These provide canonical support for the emphases of later theological traditions. Every account of providence can draw upon scriptural support, many seeking a systematic resolution of tensions within the text by allowing one model to dominate or exclude others. In what follows, I shall identify a diversity of approaches to divine providence in Scripture. These should not be forced into one single form or theory but acknowledged as a plurality of ways in which God relates to the creation. If providence is a way of capturing important aspects of divine action, then we might expect this to reflect the relational complexity of God's dealings with the world. Accordingly, we might do better to narrate the ways of providence from the outset, rather than to propose a definition that will prove constrictive in scope and distortive in outcome.

1.2.1 General Providence

At first glance, there is evident scriptural support for general providence. This appears unproblematic. The ordering of creation is celebrated as beneficial and majestic. Attesting the glory of God, the universe – considered both as a totality and in microscopic detail – is recognised as good for creatures. Not only a feature of the opening creation narratives in Genesis 1–2, this order and harmony are frequently attested in the Psalter (e.g. Psalms 8, 19, 65, 104, 148) and integrated with other elements of Israel's faith. With its promise of annual seasons and the succession of day and night, the covenant

[21] Mark Elliott notes that a range of Hebrew verbs might be appropriated under the concept of providence. See *The Heart of Biblical Theology: Providence Experienced* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 150–4.

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with Noah is a sign of divine faithfulness to all creatures on the face of the earth (Genesis 8:22). So far, so good. This regularity of nature has appealed to almost forms of providentialism, including the more minimalist accounts of those on the far side of deism.

Yet two further aspects of creation theology need to be noted. The first is the way in which the order of the world is sometimes depicted as threatened and mysterious. Surd elements are already evident in the 'face of the deep' and the 'formless void' in the opening verses of Genesis. Elsewhere, God is required to contain unruly forces while humans are frequently threatened by the hazards of creation, including famine, earthquake, flood and disease. Such surd-like components are less easily accommodated in a cheerful theology of nature. Images of evil are deployed to depict the ways in which creation continues to be menaced by hostile forces (Psalm 74:12–17; Isaiah 51:9–10).[22] God struggles to overcome these. The temptation is to suppress this imagery in the interests of a monotheism predicated on the sovereignty of God (Isaiah 40:25–6). Here the serpent, Leviathan and even Satan can be domesticated through either creaturely status or membership of the heavenly court (Genesis 3:1; Job 1–2; Psalm 104:26). In the whirlwind speeches in Job, God rules over creation, even its most unfathomable reaches and dangerous animals (Job 38–42). The determination in those passages to avoid dualism generates the problem of God willing evil. The Old Testament lives with this unresolved tension. Yet the determination of God to overcome evil and thus not to abandon the project of creation is a persistent theme. This generates notions of partnership, solicitude and a constancy of being and purpose. The forces of evil

[22] 'Two and a half millennia of Western theology have made it easy to forget that throughout the ancient Near Eastern world, including Israel, the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing but the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and sustaining order.' Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 12. Further comment is offered by Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. 534–42.

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are not dismissed by divine fiat, so much as overcome from within creation by God's redemptive activity, a theme that resonates with Paul's discourse on the foolishness of the cross. The serpent and Satan have a scope for action that requires counteraction by God. To this extent, divine providence has a reactive dimension in Scripture which should not be dissolved or explained merely as a concession to human ways of thinking.

1.2.2 Continuous Creation by the Two Hands of God

This leads to the second and correlative feature of Hebrew creation theology. God's work does not cease on the sixth day. This is merely the first of a sequence of diverse actions that continue in nature and history. Divine provision is not restricted to the initial endowment of nature; the action of God continues to make provision and to offer direction.[23] Here two bridge concepts became important in the development of theological expressions of the continuous creative activity of God – these are wisdom (*ḥokmah*) and spirit (*ruaḥ*). Both connect God and the world by denoting forms of divine agency that extend beyond the making of the world. Throughout Proverbs, wisdom is celebrated not only in the natural world but also in domestic and social life. As universal, pervasive and active, divine wisdom permeates the created order. While evident in nature, its reach includes ethical and political forms of life. Yet wisdom is also mysterious.[24] In Job and Ecclesiastes, there is a reaction against ideologies that too readily claim to possess wisdom or to assume a simple correlation between virtue and

[23] Brueggemann suggests that divine providence is most obviously captured in the Hebrew Bible by verbal constructions that suggest divine provision: 'This is no absentee ruler, but one who plans ahead, thinks ahead, works ahead, and acts ahead, so that the world of real possibility is ready and waiting in Yahweh's enormous generosity.' *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 353.

[24] See ibid., pp. 685–9.

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worldly prosperity. The race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong (Ecclesiastes 9:11). The familiar pieties of Job's friends no longer have traction: 'Have windy words no limit?' (Job 16:3). Similarly, new social circumstances may sometimes require deconstruction of earlier platitudes. 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.' Here an assumption of transgenerational punishment needs to be contested and even rejected. Such teachings are neither as timeless nor as unassailable as was formerly claimed (Ezekiel: 18:2–4; Jeremiah 31:29–30). This process of discerning wisdom is never complete but presents itself afresh to each generation.

The speeches of God at the end of Job point to a grandeur and beauty in creation. But they also teach that this is not a risk-free world or one that is devoid of suffering and misfortune. Purposes that altogether elude human understanding are suggested. There are creatures who contribute to the goodness and harmony of the world but have little relation to human concerns of utility. The animals include Leviathan and Behemoth (Job 40:15ff). Although symbols of evil forces in ancient near eastern mythology, these are fearsome creatures known by God. Presumably they belong among the animals that were named by Adam in Eden (Genesis 2:19–20). Yet Job is given a reminder that they are dangerous and that human beings can suffer from them. No sudden or easy resolution is to be expected on God's part. The world is created, ordered and constrained but without a tight control or immediate interposition by its Maker to ensure those outcomes that human beings might prefer. No answers are offered to Job. Instead God's perspective is offered. Divine wisdom requires Job to see a bigger picture, although not one that can be fully comprehended or rendered free of flaw and ambiguity.[25]

[25] See Norman C. Habel, 'In defense of God the sage' in Leo. Perdue and W. Clark Gilpin (eds.), *The Voice from the Whirlwind: Interpreting the Book of Job* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), pp. 21–38.

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These wisdom themes are present also in a different context in the teaching of Jesus, particularly the oft-quoted passage in the Sermon on the Mount about unnecessary worry (Matthew 6:25–34). Here God's parental care governs the flowers of the field and the birds of the air. So, how much more, reasons Jesus, must God be concerned with human lives. Again, there is no promise of sudden relief from suffering or accident or premature death – only the assurance that the reign of God will come upon us. The Authorised Version translates the closing verse of this section rather memorably: 'Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof' (Matthew 6:34). Put more prosaically, today's troubles will be enough to worry about for the time being. This is neither a counsel of despair or resignation nor a declaration of divine determinism. The troubles that befall us must be set in their place. We should understand them and deal with them only by reference to the commonwealth of God already breaking upon us.

One clear implication of this approach is that the relationship between God and creation is not exhausted by a single act of origination. The world continues as the arena in which the work and wisdom of God are evident. This is a place of divine concern and oversight, of knowledge, rule and attention, even if these do not take the form of micro-management and total control. Creatures are given their time and space, and allowed to be under the providence of God. Creation is both original and continuous.

More elusive, and later partially eclipsed by wisdom, the term 'spirit' is also frequently used by Old Testament writers to describe the presence and action of God in ways that include the gift of life (Psalm 104:29–30), charismatic empowerment (1 Samuel 16:13–14), the inspiration of prophets (Micah 3:8) and messianic appointment (Isaiah 11:2). The spirit of God is everywhere present (Psalm 139:7). Divine transcendence does not imply absence. Its power is life-giving, energising and directional. This notion is developed extensively in the New Testament, with its images of the dove of peace (Mark 1:10), tongues of fire (Acts 2:3–4), an advocate

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(John 14:16), gifts for the upbuilding of the church (1 Corinthians 12:1) and fruits of Christian living (Galatians 5:22–3). Despite the relative neglect of the spirit in the church's theology, such profusion of scriptural reference alerts us to the multiple ways in which God is present, active and apparent in the life of the world. One of the deficits of classical theology is its tendency to appropriate providential action to the first person of the Trinity only. In subsequent chapters, I shall argue for a better distribution across all three articles of the faith.

This survey of scriptural materials already suggests a multiplicity of forms of divine action in making the world, pervading its life, and acting in the course of history. The division between a general and a special providence is thus blurred. Although the distinction has some residual uses, we should not divide these too rigidly, as if the providence of God were limited to two discrete forms. This is neither a hard and fast division, nor is divine action reducible to only two types. Providence has original, universal and pervasive forms, as well as particular manifestations which themselves reflect some diversity. In relation to history, this raises further questions about the mode of divine activity, particularly with respect to human autonomy.

Among the books of the Bible, the Psalter offers the richest reflections on providence. Here divine actions are invoked, attested and celebrated both individually and collectively. In praising and celebrating these, the Psalmists convey their providential benefits. Amid the diversity of forms, a consistency in God's ways is discovered and trusted. These comprehend the establishment of creation, the abundance of nature, the presence of wisdom throughout the world, the preservation of humans and animals, the positive functions of law, the blessings of political justice, the punishment of evil, and the protection and guidance of individual people. At the same time, God's praise is sung within a world that is experienced as dangerous, frustrating and conflicted. Enemies are seldom far away, and often there is a descent into vituperative rhetoric. In reading Psalm 36, to

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take one example, we find these strands woven together in ways that resist any simple systematisation.

1.2.3 Divine Sovereignty and improvisation

In much of the way that the history of Israel is read, there is support for a strong divine determinism and overruling of human affairs. What appear on one reading to be contingent and fluctuating military outcomes, can be regarded on another as the outworking of divine wrath, judgement and mercy. In some places, this might resemble a utilising of worldly affairs to a greater end, for example the adoption of Cyrus as God's anointed in Isaiah 45:1ff. This action of God does not abrogate creaturely causes so much as work through them, though divine sovereignty is intensified in subsequent passages: 'I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe' (Isaiah 45:7). In other places, God's will appears to operate in ways that sustain the counterfactual conditional; that is, if God had not willed these outcomes, then the creaturely causes would not have obtained. This is not merely an adapting of materials that lie to hand but rather a determining of specific outcomes.

Many passages do not flinch from this strong determinist line, even when it generates some serious moral and theological problems. This applies especially to the Deuteronomistic history. The people of Ashdod are struck with terror, tumours and death. The primary agent is God, whose 'hand was very heavy there' (1 Samuel 5:6). Later in the narrative we learn that it is the Lord who gives Israel the victory (1 Samuel 14:23). And yet soon within the same sequence of events, the possibility of an alternative modality appears with references to a repenting and changing of mind on God's part: 'I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me, and has not carried out my commands' (1 Samuel 15:11 – see also Genesis 6:6; Amos 7:3; Jonah 3:10). Embarrassed by such seeming anthropomorphism, commentators

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from Philo onwards have interpreted these texts in different ways. Calvin, for example, insisted that all references to a change of mind were merely expressions of speech intended to accommodate the capacities of a human audience – there could be no question of God's lacking foreknowledge or having to alter course on account of unexpected creaturely choices.[26] On the other side, some recent philosophers of religion have appealed to these texts as authorising a more improvised approach to divine providence which requires an abridgement of the traditional account of omniscience.[27]

Such passages provide support for a more synergist reading of biblical history. Given the conditions of creation, God must wrestle with recalcitrant material to bring about intended outcomes. For much of the time, the rule of God is deferred, though registered in sign, promise and down payment. This eschatological directionality is central to New Testament understandings of how God's purposes are being enacted in history. Divine providence is not perfectly instantiated everywhere. It follows a narrative shape and is temporally distributed. The creation will only fully be under the divine sway at the end of time, though this is not the outcome of a linear progression. This generates an account of providence in which the wisdom of God's continual action is maintained and revealed along a sequence of events marked by threats, setbacks and disruption. This involves reference in Paul to both past and future events. When the time was right, Christ was born (Galatians 4:4). Yet the full mystery of God's plan awaits some further manifestation with the gathering together of Israel and the church (Romans 11:26).

These tensions in Scripture are vividly telescoped in Jeremiah 18:1–11, where we are presented with the image of the potter at his wheel. The material is at the disposal of God to be reworked in any

[26] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), I.17.13.

[27] For example, John R. Lucas, *Freedom and Grace* (London: SPCK, 1976).

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way that God judges fit. 'Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter has done? says the Lord' (v. 6). The emphasis here is firmly on divine control and the effective will of God, though the artistic analogy may allow some scope for notions of constraint in relation to the materials at hand.[28] And yet, curiously, this image is immediately followed by a sense of the conditionality of divine action. If a nation or kingdom turns from its evil, then God's mind may be changed (v. 8). Or, vice versa, if a nation or kingdom does evil, then God may repent of the good that was originally intended. The verb *niḥam* generates some difficulties here for translators, yet it is clear that, whatever equivalent is used, some connotations of change, turning and adjustment attach to God's agency in response to creaturely wills. The interpretive tactic of reading the text as composite and so reflecting the different theological perspectives of two authors is hardly useful in this context, since we are left with a canonical registering of both perspectives. Either we must choose one or else we must find a way of holding both together in some creative tension.

Alongside the texts of divine repentance, others in the Hebrew Bible explicitly rule that there is no inconstancy or fickleness on God's part. These can appear in close proximity to the idea of divine repentance. 'Moreover the Glory of Israel will not recant or change his mind, for he is not a mortal, that he should change his mind' (1 Samuel 15:29). Similarly, Numbers 23:19 asserts that 'God is not a human being, that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind.' The tendency of such passages is to outlaw any suggestion that the being of God is subject to fluctuations in mood or character. There is a singularity of purpose and action on the part of Israel's God. Though this may take account of creaturely outcomes, the divine rule is consistent in all its dispensations.

[28] This is noted by R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), p. 123. In what follows, I am indebted to his reading of Jeremiah 18.

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This tension between divine sovereignty and creaturely contingency is apparent in the prophetic literature. Predictions of the future reflect the priority of God's purpose and action. But there is an element of conditionality built into these, which is consistent with that divine priority. God says 'I will do *x*', meaning that, unless you repent, *x* is going to happen to you. Or 'I will do *y*' is a promise that can be revoked in the event of human weakness. This appears to be the logic of Jeremiah 18. 'Prophetic announcement of coming disaster can be seen to have the logic and dynamics of *warning* … Comparably, prophetic announcements of coming good have the logic and the dynamics of *invitation*.'[29] Yet this does not reflect caprice on God's part; on the contrary, the adaptation of divine action reflects an underlying consistency of intention. Hence an element of responsiveness and mutuality marks the divine–human relationship, though this remains asymmetrical owing to God's character and prevenient action.

In general, the theological tradition, particularly in the west, has tended to side with the more determinist exegesis of such passages in Scripture. Through resonating with philosophies of providence in the ancient world, these readings became closely linked to a traditional account of the divine attributes. This tendency was no doubt reinforced by the need to exclude the obvious alternative, namely that some events happen outside the scope of God's sovereign rule. A world that was improvidently constructed seems unworthy of a God who creates, rules and disposes. Such notions are more akin to Epicurean approaches to chance and randomness, which have never sat comfortably alongside Christian theology.

My argument is that the reading of Scripture in the church's theology of providence has been generally inadequate to the diversity of biblical materials, especially the preponderance of those passages which testify to divine interaction, creaturely causality, contingency and eschatological deferral. In the life and teaching

[29] Ibid., p. 120.

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of Jesus, we find abundant reference to the hiddenness of God's reign, its germination and subsequent growth in concealed ways. Providence is more like a work in progress than a project that is complete and perfect *ab initio*. This is further accentuated in the theology of the cross, which is foolishness when measured by Greek philosophical conventions. Although this is primarily an epistemological observation about our discernment of providence, there are some ontic antecedents. The world is not as it should be in every respect – far from it. And to speak of each event as willed by God is problematised by recognition of the partial, hidden and counter-intuitive ways in which the reign of God is fulfilled. A more dynamic and future-oriented account of providence is required to make sense of these features of biblical history. Divine sovereignty should take anticipatory and promissory forms, as opposed to a full and perpetual realisation. So we proceed here with an initial hermeneutical decision about how to read divine providence across the Bible. Its success or otherwise will require extensive argumentation in the chapters ahead.

Here is an initial hypothesis. Providence in Scripture narrates an account of the God–world relationship that has general, pervasive and particular features which are characterised in covenantal terms. Although asymmetrical, this relationship between God and creatures is one of co-dependence. Even while threatened by human failure and the turbulence of natural and historical forces, the world is overruled by God's good purposes, which are directed towards a future resolution. For the New Testament writers this is decisively expressed in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. For the church, God's providence continues in the indwelling and inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In some ways, this must generate a dissonance with the dominant accounts of providence in ancient Hellenistic philosophy. Notions of struggle and resistance have to be incorporated, together with the stronger historical, pneumatic and eschatological sense that the world needs to be redeemed and remade by the creative action of God. This seems far removed from

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Plotinus' image of the entire world as ordained by a single radiating gaze. By contrast, in the scriptural witness, the Spirit of God works to express itself in the life of the world. Often faced with opposition, its manifestations are generally hidden, surprising and discerned only by 'those with eyes to see'. This contrast with the wisdom of the ancient world is most marked in the Pauline epistles. Later Christian appropriations of ancient philosophy accommodated Stoic notions of patience, fortitude and perseverance, while also insisting upon the importance of viewing divine providence in its wider cosmic setting. But, in so doing, they did not fully reflect these scriptural themes and so set the theology of providence in a default position now in need of some revision.

1.2.4 Divine Relationality

Much that is embedded in the later church doctrine of providence can be called into question on grounds of scriptural adequacy. This has become particularly apparent through recent encounter with Jewish exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. The assertion that God is in some sense dependent upon creation is in tension with much of what has traditionally been held concerning God's aseity and impassibility. Divine self-sufficiency and immutability have sometimes been taken to imply that there is no real relation between God and the world. The creation cannot act upon God to change or modify or harm God, so ontologically dissimilar are creatures and their Creator. This element of the tradition is important in pointing to ways in which the faithfulness, constancy and serenity of God are quite unlike creaturely attributes; for this reason, the Creator–creation relation is an asymmetric one of like and unlike. Nevertheless, the surface narrative of Scripture strongly suggests that these relations are marked by co-dependence and a relative though different autonomy of parties. At the very least, we should not allow this to be ignored on account of philosophical scruples.

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Here I follow the recent scholarship of writers who concentrate on the relationality of God with respect to creation, a relationality that is often expressed though not exhausted by the language of covenant.[30] References scattered throughout the Hebrew Scriptures suggest that God is a relational being by virtue of the divine community that God inhabits. Later Christian theology has been nervous around these allusions, particularly since they seem to threaten an exclusive monotheism. However, we read of the divine council, the sons of God, heavenly messengers and a celestial wisdom (Genesis 1:26; Isaiah 6:8; Jeremiah 23:18–23; Proverbs 8: 22–31). Whatever their ontological status or function, it is clear that they underscore the strong scriptural sense of God existing in a communicative relationship with other conscious beings and as being properly characterised in personal and relational terms. Biblical metaphors for God are generally personal rather than impersonal, often making use of quite anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language. Fretheim classifies these metaphors as personal, ordinary, concrete, everyday and secular.[31] In other words, they typically draw upon the mundane world of social life to characterise the identity of God in relation to the world. Fretheim notes that even non-personal metaphors tend towards a relational aspect: 'I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' (Exodus 19:4). The giving of the divine name to Israel also intensifies the covenant relationship, entailing further possibilities of encounter and communication. At the same time, however, it makes God's honour vulnerable to the misuse of that name.

The Hebrew prohibition of images is not cited to protect God's ineffability or unknowability so much as to avoid misrepresenting God's relatedness. The idols 'have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; and there is no

[30] In what follows, I have drawn especially from Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

[31] Ibid., pp. 17–19.

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breath in their mouths' (Psalm 115:5–7). Unlike the false gods in the contest on Mount Carmel, Israel's God is one who lives and therefore can speak, hear and act. As such, this God is also the creator of the world, living in relation not only to Israel but to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3). The affirmation that 'God is' or 'God lives' is explicated in dynamic, personal and relational terms by the Old Testament. Here God is not approached by a philosophical *via negativa* or an abstract account of the most perfect being, so much as through a tradition of divine–human exchange.

The relationship of God to creatures is expressed, moreover, through a system in which all creatures are interrelated in a cosmic whole. God does not relate to us merely as individuals but as persons who exist in relation to one another and to the wider environment. The social and natural orders of the world are deeply connected in ways that affect God also, a point that has some urgency given our acute awareness of environmental despoliation. This is a recurrent theme in the Psalms and the prophets. 'The land mourns and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing' (Hosea 4:1–3). One feature of this web of life is that we have a system that is neither chaotic nor deterministic. There is a rhythm that is natural to it in the regularity of the seasons, the succession of day and night, the movement of the planets and the universal patterns of life and death. The world is God's good creation. At the same time, however, there is 'no little play in the system'.[32] Within the order of the cosmos, there are events that appear random, surprising and surd. There are forces, sometimes within us, that threaten the harmony and delicate complexity of life. Although good and worthy of celebration, the world is not yet a finished project; it remains a site under construction. The closing speeches of the Book of Job explore this duality of divinely bestowed order threatened by untamed forces. This ambivalence of God's world needs to be registered by

[32] Ibid., p. 19.

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an adequate theology of providence. It is a world created good, but not yet perfect.

If we think of an interconnected world established in a continuing relationship with its Maker and Redeemer, then we can attribute a proper place to creaturely action, initiative and power in ways that reflect the co-dependence of God without lapsing into lamented forms of synergism or Pelagianism. The divine–human relationship is asymmetric in terms of its setting, yet it is one in which God becomes reactive and in important respects dependent upon what has been made. Within this conceptual space, activities such as prayer, obedience, rebellion, forgiveness, redemption and blessing become possible. Fretheim writes,

> God works from within a committed relationship with the world and not on the world from without in total freedom. God's faithfulness to promises made always entails the limiting of divine options. Indeed, such is the nature of this divine commitment that the relationship with Israel (and, in a somewhat different way, the world) is now constitutive of the divine identity. The life of God will forever include the life of the people of God as well as the life of the world more generally.[33]

For Scripture, providence is not confined to a general setting of the terms in which life is lived, although this is part of it. There are also notions of guidance, presence, protection and blessing that determine individual actors and particular episodes in the history of peoples and individuals. The stories of the patriarchs, for example Jacob at Bethel, are marked by a strong sense of divine oversight and direction. Frequently this takes the form of promise, even if the promises are not fulfilled in quite the ways that might be expected.

[33] Ibid., p. 20. Levenson writes of a covenantal theonomy which gives Israel a choice and a role, but these are given in such a way that a choice against is really no choice at all. The option of refusal is a possibility that can scarcely be considered. See *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, pp. 140–8.

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The seed of Abraham is not always as successful and triumphant in subsequent history as a straight fulfilment of this promise would imply. The story of Joseph concludes with a strong sense of the wise rule of God overriding the sins of his brothers in selling him into slavery. Provision is made for the survival of Jacob's family during the years of famine. The Book of Genesis concludes on this note of provision as Joseph is reconciled with his brothers: 'Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones' (Genesis 50:19–21).

This theme of special providence informs the history of Israel as it is narrated, and it continues into the New Testament in much of what is said about the history of the church in Acts. The Spirit sustains, preserves and guides the spread of the faith, even while we read elsewhere of division, factionalism and frequent failures to live the gospel. Again there is both human confusion and divine oversight, the latter supervening the former in some mysterious way. This dialectic of divine faithfulness and human shortcoming is also apparent in the Psalms. The protection of God is affirmed repeatedly (e.g. Psalm 121) yet sin has to be confessed (e.g. Psalm 51), while misfortune and suffering result in frequent complaint and lament (e.g. Psalm 42).

John Rogerson has warned against imposing nineteenth-century ideas of historical progress and unity upon Old Testament texts. For most of the Hebrew writers, there is little sense of a single world history that is unfolding according to a divine plan. The prophets have little to say about other nations except when they impinge upon Israel's history. Elsewhere, we find a series of historical episodes that become occasions for judgements or deliverance. But these do not constitute a single organised whole.[34]

[34] John Rogerson, 'Can a doctrine of providence be based on the Old Testament?' in Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor (eds.), *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1988), pp. 529–43.

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1.2.5 The Cruciform Pattern of Providence

In interpreting God's ways in the New Testament there is much that fits this same pattern, particularly in Paul's remarks about the foolishness of the cross. The means by which God's wisdom is displayed is not through standardised norms of power, such as those depicted in Greek philosophy. Instead, the world is redeemed through the death of the Messiah, the paradigmatic image of divine weakness and dependence upon the created world. It is worth reminding ourselves that Paul speaks of this as folly to those schooled in ancient philosophy. The providential ordering of the cruciform lifestyle is unlikely therefore to be continuous with other approaches or outlooks. This folly represents a clash of epistemologies, albeit one that has frequently been sidestepped.[35] How then might we think again about divine providence? What are the implications for our understanding of God's presence and rule in the world of Jesus' taking upon himself the lament of Psalm 22 in his hour of death? At least one conclusion that we should draw from this is that the providence of God is not universally perspicuous. As we shall see, this may have been a mistake that Calvin made in occasionally treating providence as an article of natural theology. If Paul's words to the Corinthians are close to the mark, then the wisdom of God's rule is apparent only as we enter the life of faith empowered by the Spirit. It cannot be deduced from the pages of history or the observations of philosophy, as many of the great thinkers of pagan antiquity had sought to do. Providence is here represented not as a speculative vision or intellectual insight but as a practical perspective that makes sense in the light of other commitments. As such, this reverses many natural assumptions, including some that continue to threaten the account of providence offered in later Christian history.

The divine interruption of cosmic processes is accentuated in Galatians with its criticism of the earthly powers (στοιχεία τού

[35] This is described by A. C. Thiselton, *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 157ff.

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κόσμου). These should be identified with the primal forces which Stoic philosophers believed comprised the four elements of the physical universe.[36] By insisting upon their defeat, Paul criticises all forms of religious observance that acknowledge or venerate the rule of these elemental forces. With the appearance of Christ at the right time, these are no longer worthy of our devotion. 'Now, however, that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and beggarly elemental spirits?' (Galatians 4:9). Continued religious observance of the στοιχεία is a retreat into false practice. The God of Jesus is proclaimed apart from the elemental forces; with his resurrection from the dead, believers are now liberated from previous forms of enslavement. How this generates a new theory of providence is not altogether clear, yet it must include reference to the advent of the Son of God, his crucifixion and resurrection, and the liberating experience of the Spirit. From those core ingredients of faith, there arises an understanding of divine rule in ways that signal a departure from the standard approaches in the ancient philosophical world.

The reference at Galatians 4:4 to the birth of Christ when 'the fullness of time had come' (see also 1 Timothy 2:6) is developed by Augustine and later theologians in the context of their providential thinking. The economy of salvation betokens the foresight and wisdom of God, rather than a sudden scrambling to initiate a recovery process. Thomas Aquinas reflects at length on why the incarnation came neither at the beginning nor at the end of the world but at some mid-point in its history.[37] This was altogether fitting for the purposes of redemption. As he continues his

[36] See for example Martinus C. de Boer, 'Cross and cosmos in Galatians' in David J. Downs and Matthew L. Skinner (eds.), *The Unrelenting God: God's Action in Scripture, Essays in Honor of Beverly Roberts Gaventa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), pp. 208–25.

[37] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a.1. All citations are from the Blackfriars edition.

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exposition of the incarnation, he stresses that the precise time was fitting because the world was at peace and under one ruler when Christ was born.[38] Although this speculation goes beyond the precise terms of Scripture, it might be seen as following a pattern of interpretation deeply ingrained in Pauline theology. Here a retelling of the scriptural story of creation and redemption is crucial to Paul's description of the Gentile church. The gospel is not just about the sin and forgiveness of the individual; its proper expression requires attention to a much wider cosmic and historical context in which God is provident.[39] This is part of an unfolding plan intended by God but only now unveiled with the coming of Christ. Although the term *pronoia* is not invoked, it seems clear that notions of foreknowledge, plan, wisdom and scriptural fulfilment are thoroughly providential in communicating God's purpose for Israel and the nations.[40] Hence Romans 9–11 is not a sudden digression into a philosophy of history but instead a sub-plot that is crucial to the wider narrative that Paul seeks to rehearse throughout Romans. In affirming at 8:28 that God works in everything for good, Paul reiterates the sense of providence that emerges throughout the course of his extensive argument. This does not commit us to a total predetermination of each event, or the platitude that everything will be all right, so much as the conviction that in and through all events God is steadfastly active in fulfilling the divine will. The good is that towards which

[38] Ibid., 3a.35.8.

[39] In making this point, Beverley Gaventa points out that the terms 'repentance' and 'forgiveness' have little place in the Pauline lexicon by contrast with broader notions of 'deliverance'. See Beverley Roberts Gaventa, *When in Romans: An Invitation to Linger with the Gospel According to Paul* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), p. 42.

[40] Here I am indebted to Grant Macaskill, 'History, providence and the apocalyptic Paul', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 70.4 (2017), 409–26. Macaskill argues that closer attention to the theology of providence may help to overcome the impasse between those rival interpretations of Pauline theology in which the predominance of apocalyptic or salvation-history categories is contested.

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everything is moving, rather than an inherent quality of the status quo.[41] In this context of Romans 8:18–39, it carries a strong promissory element set in the future tense and directed towards the liberation of the created order.

What emerges is a new understanding of the steadfast purposes of God emerging amid the vicissitudes of history, though likely to remain obscure outside the perspective of faith.[42] This is strongly underscored by those passages in Ephesians and Colossians which describe a divine plan temporally extended from creation to the eschaton (Ephesians 1:3–14, 3:1–13; Colossians 1:15–29). Although these reflections are often cited in support of a cosmic Christology, their providential import is also significant. The Christ event is continuous with all God's work, so that it can be viewed as central and pivotal to the enactment of a single economy of creation and salvation. This, however, is hidden, mysterious and not apparent except with the eye of faith, that is, to the saints (Colossians 1:26).

Recognising the element of mystery here, we should also respect the plurality of scriptural voices and themes, together with other Jewish possibilities of interpretation. An over-systematising of the text for the sake of demonstrating a meta-narrative is to be avoided. There are figurative ways in which earlier patterns and themes can resonate with the cross and resurrection as the index to God's purposes in and through the world. This process is already underway in the New Testament writings and continues in the theological exegesis of the church. But these should be seen as permitting

[41] See Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), p. 132. Johnson explicitly identifies this passage as an expression of divine providence.

[42] See for example N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013), pp. 456–537. Wright's project has been challenged for over-schematising salvation history. See John M. G. Barclay, 'Article review: *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 68.2 (2015), 235–43.

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a Christian providential reading of Scripture rather than driving all other possibilities from the field.

Together with the aforementioned themes from the Hebrew Bible, an account of providence that is cruciform in its shape must be significantly different in two key respects from the philosophies of providence that characterised Platonist and Stoic philosophy. Considered ontically, the providential rule of God sometimes works against nature and history. The resurrection of Christ from the dead is a disruption of the natural order of death, and the sign of a new age that is already breaking upon us with the outpouring of the Spirit. Considered noetically, this providential pattern that irrupts within the world is an article of faith believed by the church rather than an aspect of a speculative philosophy. The need to bring religious and philosophical tendencies into a single configuration is a task bequeathed to later generations. But whether we find sufficient differentiation of these trajectories in the traditions of the church is at least an open question.

1.2.6 The Multiple Forms of Providence in Scripture

On the basis of all this, we might further refine the hypothesis by stating that providence in Scripture is *general* (it signifies the way the world is made), *universal* (it is neither occasional nor intermittent but pervasive in all societies through the agency of wisdom), *particular* (it determines the individual circumstances of people and communities, including Israel and the church, where some patterns and shapes can be discerned), *hidden* (it requires the discernment of faith and even then is often inscrutable), *contested* (the presence of evil, suffering and misfortune create obstacles and crises for our more naïve intuitions) and *incomplete* (an eschatological resolution is promised and anticipated).

As a proposal to be developed, I offer the following as ways in which these trajectories of Scripture appears to diverge significantly

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from the leading treatments of providence in antique philosophy. These differences are of both a theoretical and practical nature. First, the created order is seriously disrupted by surd elements and therefore in need of redemptive and eschatological resolution. This prevents any simple equation of the present or past condition of the cosmos with the perfect ordering of a divine providence. The 'not yet' character of God's reign requires a providential reserve which works against Stoic *apatheia* as a response to the way the world is. The invocation 'Thy will be done' is not a strategy of resignation but a petition for a re-ordering of earth according to the ways of heaven. Its parabolic corollary is the importunate widow's assailing of the unjust judge. Second, the differentiated forms of divine action require a corresponding account of providence in which there is a blending of general, particular, interactional and universal themes. Providence cannot be assimilated to a single model of divine agency, as for example an account of general providence in which the world is shaped according to rational principles. This may be part of the story but it needs to be enhanced by reference to the universal and particular actions of God's two hands – the Word and the Spirit – in cosmic history. Third, the affirmation of divine providence is an act of faith. Several of the parables indicate that the kingdom of God is hidden even while it is present and spreading. The apprehension of divine providence is often in the ordinary, the provincial and the insignificant, at least from a Roman imperial perspective.

This is further accentuated by Paul in 1 Corinthians. The gospel has the character of promise for those who receive it. For example, in the conviction that the resurrection of Christ is a token of what will happen, this promise is a vital ingredient. Given this promissory dimension, the awareness of providence must lack the fullness of complete vision; it is received 'through a glass darkly' so that its wider discernment remains incomplete and necessarily tentative. As a component of faith, the belief in providence retains this occluded character, which should prevent the confident interpretation of each event as an element of a single divine blueprint.

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1.3 The Early Church

In studying the doctrine of providence in the early church, we encounter a series of reflections, often underdeveloped, that borrow in some measure from ancient philosophy, particularly Stoicism, while at the same time articulating more distinctive themes that are derived from reflection upon Scripture. Unlike Trinity, Christology and pneumatology, providence was never a central item of sustained theological reflection. In the writings of Justin Martyr, Theophilus of Antioch, Origen and Clement of Alexandria it is treated occasionally and unsystematically. Providence did not become the focus of major dogmatic controversy. The classical creeds are silent on the concept, though one might reasonably claim that they are organised in a quasi-temporal sequence to convey a providential purpose.

The linguistic prominence of *pronoia* in Christian theology owes a great deal to the influence of ancient philosophy. This has also had a significant effect upon its material content. Here an account of providence was offered, largely in conscious opposition to notions of chance and randomness. A later Stoic work, Seneca's *De Providentia*, written in the middle of the first century CE, exhorts its readers to trust in a cosmic order of which they are a part.

> This much I now say, – that those things which you call hardships, which you call adversities and accursed are, in the first place, for the good of the persons themselves to whom they come; in the second place, that they are for the good of the whole human family, for which the gods have a greater concern than for single persons; again, I say that good men are willing that these things should happen and, if they are unwilling, that these things happen thus by destiny, and that they rightly befall good men by the same law which makes them good.[43]

[43] Seneca, 'De providentia' in *Moral Writings*, ed. John Basore, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1928), 3.1–2, 15.

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Two features of the Stoic account are relevant in assessing its appropriation by Christian theology. First, it is an austere account in which an impersonal moral purpose is fulfilled through everything that happens.[44] Within this worldview the sufferings that befall us are to be accepted as our fate, which, if we willingly assent to it in the proper manner, will lead to an increase in virtue. Second, this account tends towards a radical determinism in the role that is assigned to human freedom and responsibility. Both Zeno and Chrysippus liken the human situation to that of a dog tied to a cart. The dog can willingly run along keeping pace with the cart, or else it will be dragged. Either way its destination remains the same.[45] By this account, every event serves a purpose. Foreseen by the gods, the total system of causes governing the universe can be described as 'fate'. Nevertheless, the pronounced resignation that is suggested by this image needs to be tempered. For the Stoic sage, it is what we feel within ourselves that is important. Freedom is realised by learning to will what must happen. By accommodating our inner being to the exterior world, we can learn to live more serenely. For this reason, the distinction between the dog that is dragged and the dog that runs is important. There is a qualitative difference for the Stoics between the smooth-flowing life and one of turmoil.[46]

These tendencies are undoubtedly present in the writers of the early church, particularly in resisting Epicurean trends. But they are also adapted, and at times checked and corrected. There are repeated denials of fatalism and also a stress upon the parental, personal and specific provision of God for human creatures. In her valuable

[44] There is some variety within Stoicism on this point. Epictetus, for instance, accentuates a more personal account of providence that pays heed to the circumstances of each individual. See Dragona-Monachou, 'Divine providence in the philosophy of the empire', p. 4445. This may explain why Epictetus was influential among some Christian deists in the eighteenth century.

[45] See John Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 127.

[46] See A. A. Long, 'Freedom and determinism in the Stoic theory of human action' in A. A. Long (ed.), *Problems in Stoicism* (London: Athlone Press, 1971), pp. 75–113.

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study of the literature, Silke-Petra Bergjan notes the recurrence of several themes: the retributive character of divine providence, its pedagogical function, its eschatological ordering and its particular concern for individuals.[47] While much of the thought and language is borrowed, it reflects an attention to scriptural themes. For example, Theophilus of Antioch can write as if pagan and Christian teachers say much the same thing: 'The Sibyl, then, and the other prophets, yea, and the poets and philosophers, have clearly taught both concerning righteousness and judgement, and punishment; and also concerning providence, that God cares for us, not only for the living among us, but also for those that are dead.'[48] However, the Scriptures provide clearer and deeper insights into the workings of God's providence. Justin Martyr sees neither an iron necessity nor an impersonal fate governing the affairs of human beings, but a God with foreknowledge, oversight and provision for individual men and women.

> So that what we say about future events being foretold, we do not say it as they came about by a fatal necessity; but God foreknowing all that shall be done by all men, and it being His decree that the future actions of men shall all be recompensed according to their several value, He foretells by the Spirit of prophecy that He will bestow meet rewards according to the merit of the actions done, always urging the human race to effort and recollection, showing that He cares and provides for men.[49]

Clement of Alexandria seems to split the difference by arguing at some length that providence is a widely accepted and ineluctable truth throughout the nations of the world, but that its finer details

[47] Silke-Petra Bergjan, *Der Fürsorgende Gott* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2002).

[48] Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolycus*, 2.38, in Alexander Robertson and James Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985–7), vol. II, p. 110.

[49] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 44, in Robertson and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. I, p. 177.

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are understood only by Christian philosophers. Here it emerges as an *articulus mixtus*. God is understood as the 'invisible and sole, and most powerful, and most skilful and supreme cause of all things most beautiful', but to know the implications of these truths requires the teaching of the church.[50]

While Christian formulations of providence reveal affinities with both Platonism and Stoicism, a much clearer distinction is drawn with fate. Providence and fate may have been viewed as largely convergent in Stoic philosophy, but Christian writers generally sought to distance themselves from associations of fatalism. The concept εἱμαρμένη is widely criticised on account of its links to immoral practice, astrology and philosophical absurdity. Given its failure to do justice to human freedom and the clear sense of Scripture, Christian writers felt compelled to note its differences from divine providence. This is particularly apparent in Origen and Clement of Alexandria, who distinguish God's providential care from the impersonal force detected in Stoicism. Two considerations appear to be at work here. The first is a desire to affirm human freedom and responsibility, partly in order to attribute evil to the human rather than the divine will. A second concern is to accentuate the personal and parental care of God over the world. We are not bound by an undiscerning necessity but ruled by a just and gracious Maker whose goodness is apparent in the works of creation and redemption. This construction of providence is

[50] Clement, *Stromateis*, 5.14, in Robertson and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. II, p. 474. See also Origen's Stoic-like description of providence in *De Principiis*, 2.1.3: 'Although the whole world is arranged into offices of different kinds, its condition, nevertheless, is not to be supposed as one of internal discrepancies and discordances; but as our one body is provided with many members, and is held together by one soul, so I am of opinion that the whole world also ought to be regarded as some huge and immense animal, which is kept together by the power and reason of God as by one soul.' Robertson and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, p. 269.

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particularly evident in the Greek tradition as it develops in later Byzantium.[51]

Two later examples, both from the early fifth century, illustrate further some of the tensions already latent within second-century teaching on providence. In a treatise dedicated to the subject, Theodoret of Cyrus advances a series of rather engaging apologetic arguments for providential order. In many ways, these anticipate the design arguments of William Paley in the early nineteenth century. The providence of God is apparent in the regulation of the planetary system, the seasons of the year, the harmony between species and environment, and the physiognomy of the human body. Even our buttocks are happily arranged, he argues, to provide a natural couch for sitting on the ground or on stone.[52] In his later discourses, he reflects at length on the ordering of society, arguing that the division between master and slave is providentially ordered for the benefit of a post-lapsarian world. This results in an instruction to respect the hierarchies that we find in every social institution, including the church:

> A father rules his family, correcting the children that are unruly and praising those that are well-behaved. The teacher rules his pupils, and the husband his wife. The master rules his slaves, regarding the better-disposed as worthy of honor, encouragement, and often of freedom. On the other hand, he corrects those who are slothful and inclined to do wrong, and he teaches them manners. The God of the universe has established this same order in the priesthood. Some He has deemed worthy to be priests, and he has appointed others to rule them. He has also set up other orders of inferior clergy.[53]

[51] See Andrew Louth, 'Pagans and Christians on providence' in J. H. D. Scourfield (ed.), *Texts and Culture in Late Antiquity: Inheritance, Authority, and Change* (Swansea: Classical Press of Wales, 2007), pp. 279–98.

[52] Theodoret of Cyrus, *On Divine Providence*, trans. Thomas Halton (New York: Newman Press, 1988), 3.21.

[53] Ibid., 7.36.

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Like much of the Hellenistic tradition on providence, Theodoret's work describes the cosmic dimensions of providence as well as the ordering of animal bodies and the regulation of human affairs. Much of this detail, however, does not engage historical processes, which are relatively absent from much of his reflection. With Augustine, in contrast, we find a stronger historical reading of God's providential ways. This is less apparent in his earlier reflections on divine providence in *De Ordine*, a work written shortly after his conversion. Here he views the world as properly ordered in every aspect by a divine providence that can be discerned through reason and revelation. The apparently dissonant elements in creation are made to serve God's purpose: the hangman, the brothel and the excesses of climate all make their contribution to a divinely ordained *telos*. While evils do not originate in God, they are ruled by the hand of providence and made to serve an order that is everywhere present. Augustine appeals to the testimony of Monica:

> I think that nothing could have been done aside from the order of God, because evil itself, which has had an origin, in no way originated by the order of God; but that divine justice permitted it not to be beyond the limits of order, and has brought it back and confined it to an order befitting it.[54]

Although the greater stress on the purposive and personal rule of God may set Augustine apart from Platonist philosophers, there remains a sense of a serene and fully ordered cosmos in each moment and aspect of its existence. Within this setting, attitudes of wonder, gratitude and acceptance appear to be the dominant practical responses.

[54] Augustine, 'Divine providence and the problem of evil' in Robert P. Russell (ed.), *Writings of St Augustine*, vol. 1 (New York: CIMA Publishing, 1948), p. 300. For an overview of Augustine's several writings on providence, see Mark W. Elliott, *Providence Perceived: Divine Action from a Human Point of View* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015), pp. 37–45.

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In the *City of God*, Augustine offers a more sombre and chastened reflection on the ways of providence, while continuing to affirm the rule of God throughout the cosmos. He inveighs against all forms of astrological fatalism. The constellation of the stars has no causal influence upon life on earth. These are not determined by remote events. As in Theodoret, much of the discussion has a curiously modern ring, particularly in Augustine's extended analysis of twins. Their similarities and differences must be accounted for by proximate causes of parentage, diet, upbringing, external circumstances and so on. None of these can be explained by the identical constellations at the time of their birth. And yet we can also affirm that God through these secondary causes, including voluntary agents, executes an overarching purpose.

As with earlier Christian thinkers, Augustine places his account of providence in close proximity to Stoic philosophy. Although both chance and a blind determinism are firmly rejected as governing causes in nature and history, he is willing to concede that the Stoic description of destiny can be transposed into the language of Christian theology. In some ways, this resembles a rebranding of an earlier philosophical tradition. But the accent is now placed both on the transcendent will of God as ordaining everything that happens and also on the reality of human freedom as divinely foreknown and so assured. Before quoting Seneca with approval, he writes, 'What they mean by "destiny" is principally the will of the supreme God, whose power extends invincibly through all things.'[55] Augustine insists that this does not abrogate free will. The necessity that attaches to God's foreknowledge – without this, God could not be God – does not transfer to human actions so as to rob these of their freedom. Since God necessarily foreknows our free choices, his foreknowledge guarantees the freedom of the will.

Augustine views the course of human history as ordained by God. He reasons that, since God has ordained the health and

[55] Augustine, *City of God*, 5.8, p. 189.

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constitution of even the lowliest creature, so *a fortiori* God must will the rise and fall of every imperial power: 'It is beyond anything incredible that he should have willed the kingdoms of men, their dominations and their servitudes, to be outside the range of the laws of his providence.'[56] What emerges from this is the conviction that everything must in its own way serve a single cosmic purpose. So the earthly city, despite its many imperfections and lust for power, is instrumental to the city of God. The vindication of goodness and the punishment of evil are already taking place, although these are only complete and finally ordered at the end of history. Much of this thinking was already present in *De Ordine*. God must foreknow and foreordain everything that comes to pass. There is nothing that can be placed outside of the order intended and created by God in both nature and history. To understand this, we need to think of evils as lesser goods or privations which belong to an order which could not be accomplished without them. While God does not desire evil, nevertheless the wisdom of God is such that evils can be used to serve a purpose that is altogether good. Hence, the rational order, evident in the constitution of even the lowliest creatures, can be discerned in human affairs.

In one important respect, this seems to move beyond Scripture into the realm of metaphysical explanation. The evils and imperfections of the world are ordained by God as part of the majestic tapestry of creation and redemption. There is a single divine blueprint that is enacted in the history of the world, each event and entity being assigned its proper place. This produces patterns of redemption and punishment whereby the truly virtuous are rewarded in heaven while the sinful mass are consigned to their righteous damnation. Divine providence is perceived in a single chiaroscuro of light and darkness, good and evil, melody and discord. With its stress on the aesthetic harmony of the world,

[56] Ibid., Book 11, p. 156.

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Book 3 of Plotinus' *Enneads* expounds a similar doctrine of providence. This is already taken up in *De Ordine*.

Augustine's later thought, however, becomes more determinist. This arises partly as a result of the struggle with Pelagianism and partly through his reflections on the difference between divine eternity and creaturely temporality, the former being construed in terms of timelessness. A comprehensive account of how the will of God becomes effective through temporal causes thus emerges. God works both intrinsically and extrinsically through natural and voluntary agents. Within the orders of creation, all creatures are sustained in being, while an inward illumination and grace are given to voluntary agents. This sets the scene for later medieval accounts of double agency. As transcendent, God does not belong to the system of creaturely causes. But as constantly involved in creaturely processes, God works everywhere through the created order.[57] Considered extrinsically, divine action can be discerned in the guidance of the total set of natural causes and in the ruling of free agents (angels and human beings) to serve God's purpose. This latter governance of voluntary causes includes first the permission and then the overruling of evil wills to God's greater glory.[58] The fine-grained providentialism and determinism of the Stoics remain in Augustine, but these are now set under the sovereign will of the eternal God.

Within the Christian east, however, a different trajectory emerges which decisively shaped Orthodox reflection upon divine providence. Much of this tradition has been largely absent from western discussions of providence, yet it merits greater attention for the sake of registering the ecumenical diversity that has long existed

[57] Simon Oliver notes the ways in which Augustine avoids both deism and pantheism in his account of divine providence working in and through the *rationes seminales*. See 'Augustine on creation, providence and motion', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 18.4 (2016), 379–98.

[58] Here I am indebted to the outlining of these in Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine: The Theologian* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 219–21.

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on these matters. The Greek writers of the fourth century already looked back to the work of Origen. Appealing to Plato's myth of Er, Origen regarded misfortune and suffering in this life as sent to remedy the evils chosen in a pre-existent state. Here divine providence can be discerned in the outcomes that attend our free choices. A pedagogical function is evident in the blending of moral training with punishment. Human autonomy is given greater scope, while remaining steadfastly fixed within a divinely ordained moral order. As a result of this tendency, a sharper distinction emerges between divine willing and permission. Although nothing escapes the scope of divine providence, there is an important difference between those things which God wills and those things to which God consents. Our human choices belong to this latter category. Although the exercise of free will produces a multiplicity of outcomes ranging from imitation of God to abject failure, Origen argues that each rational creature is created alike. Differences arise 'not from the will or judgment of the Creator, but from the freedom of the individual will'. Yet 'divine providence continues to regulate each individual according to the variety of his movements, or of his feelings and purpose'.[59] Although Origen's account of the migration of souls is not followed by subsequent theologians, his distinctive coordination of divine willing, permitting of freedom and providential ordering of its outcomes became well established in the eastern tradition.

In the development of these strands, a key source is Nemesius' *On the Nature of Man*, a late fourth-century work by the Bishop of Emesa (in Syria). Nemesius is significant not only for his reception of the Platonic tradition (and what he reveals about lost sources) but also for his influence upon later Byzantine writers including Maximus the Confessor and John of Damascus. Inveighing against Stoic notions of fate, Nemesius insists that these undercut both human responsibility and the foresight of God. Here he resists any

[59] Origen, *De Principiis,* 2.9.6, in Robertson and Donaldson, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, p. 292.

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alliance with Stoic fatalism.[60] Even 'the wise amongst the Egyptians' claimed that the fate written in the stars could be averted by prayer and sacrifices. Unlike other theologians who harmonised fate and providence, Nemesius regards these as mutually exclusive. Plato comes closer to the truth, though he must be criticised for not allowing sufficient scope for divine interaction in the creation. According to Plato, some actions are genuinely up to us, but the laws governing their consequences are fixed under the providence of God. For example, it may be up to us to decide whether to set sail, but having done so whether we are shipwrecked is determined by a natural order established by God. Yet Nemesius will not allow even this measure of necessity in the cosmos. Shipwreck may be averted by prayers and divine intervention. Hence the world created by God permits a free and particular providence within its natural order.

> In order that this should be shown to be, he once stopped the course of the sun and the moon which travel of necessity and are always the same, to show that nothing comes about for him of necessity, but everything contingently according to his authority … Also he preserves some men alive, such as Elijah and Enoch, who are mortal and subject to passing-away, in order that we should recognize through all these acts his authority and unfettered will.[61]

Human freedom is established for Nemesius on the basis of two considerations. First, actions which are evil and unjust must have their origin in us, since we cannot ascribe them to God, fate, luck or nature. And, second, the process of deliberation which sometimes precedes our actions makes no sense except on the assumption that such actions are genuinely owned and willed by us. Similar remarks are applied to activities such as encouragement, advice, praise and blame which both influence and evaluate our deliberations and

[60] Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man*, trans. R. W. Sharples and P. J. van der Eijk (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 35.184–5.

[61] Ibid.

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voluntary choices. A disposition to virtue is genuinely up to us, and is not to be attributed to external causes, even though these can exercise an influence on us. Yet divine providence still exercises a care over all things.[62] Although this is most clearly shown in the incarnation, it is also evident in ways that are discernible to pagans. Owing to our constitution, we are inclined to seek God's providence in moments of crisis. Even the sceptical and unreflective find themselves constrained. 'For also in sudden disturbances and fear we involuntarily call upon God without even thinking.'[63]

Nemesius rehearses familiar arguments, already noted in Theodoret, about the rhythms of nature, the harmony of bodies, the flourishing of species, and a moral order in which the wicked receive their deserts. These are symptoms of a general providence, to which he adds a special providence that superintends human affairs. Here his discussion moves in a more problematic direction by affirming that everything is made to serve some overarching purpose which we could discern if only we were able to see the bigger picture. This temptation to overstretch the theology of divine providence is a besetting one throughout its history, for both theologians and pastors. 'Surely also poverty has often been to our advantage, as has the burial of our children and the flight of our servants. For the preservation of worthless children or servants who became robbers would be more bitter than their loss.'[64]

Maximus the Confessor draws upon Nemesius' description of providence in *Ambiguum* 10.[65] He notes that by natural inclination

[62] 'Providence, then, is care for things by God. It is also defined as follows: providence is the wish of God by which all thing receive a suitable way of life.' Ibid., 42.208. This description of providence is later quoted approvingly by both John of Damascus and Maximus the Confessor. See Peter C. Bouteneff, 'The two wills of God: providence in St John of Damascus', *Studia Patristica*, 42 (2006), 291–6 at 294.

[63] Nemesius, *On the Nature of Man*, 43.217.

[64] Ibid., 43.215.

[65] Maximos the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua, Vol. 1*, ed. Nicholas Constas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 10.100–5. For further discussion, see Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge,

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we tend towards a belief in God's providence since 'it prepares us to seek salvation through prayers in sudden emergencies, as if pushing us towards God in an untaught way'.[66] Divine providence governs every particular to ensure that it draws each into a fitting harmony of the whole. Even though we cannot see how the diversity of parts can cohere, we must acknowledge that this is merely the result of our epistemological limitation. At the same time, he wants to distinguish clearly what happens by God's providence from the outcomes of our rational agency. Although the setting and effects of our actions are circumscribed by providence, these actions are themselves willed by us, rather than by God. Here a distinction is maintained between what God wills and what God permits. This is later summarised by John of Damascus in his differentiation of the antecedent and the consequent will of God. In this important respect, the eastern tradition tends to side with the Middle Platonists against the Stoics. Fatalism is criticised for the threat that it poses to human freedom and responsibility. While the outcomes of choice are bound by a providential order, our free decisions are not themselves fated. As a broad generalisation, we might view the east as following Platonism with the west more inclined to appropriate Stoicism.

John of Damascus also takes his cue from the Nemesian definition. And, like Maximus, he argues that all the works of providence do not include those that are to be attributed to our free will.[67] These are conceded or permitted, rather than actively willed, though providence can use these concessions for its own ends, as in the salvation that was brought about through the cross. God's original wish is that all come to salvation – this is the antecedent will – but

1996), p. 144, and Bronwen Neil, 'Divine providence and the gnomic will before Maximus' in Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (eds.), *Oxford Handbook to Maximus the Confessor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 235–52.

[66] Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, p. 146.

[67] John of Damascus, 'Exposition of the Orthodox faith' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series (New York: Scribner's, 1899), vol. IX, pp. 41–2.

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by permission of our wicked deeds, God's consequent will can chastise, discipline and punish. Providence overarches our freedom. But to understand this we must maintain a strong distinction between the active and the permissive will of God. With this in view, John is able then to expound predestination, a more minor note in eastern theology, as a function of God's foreknowledge of our free choices. What emerges is an account of human freedom that maintains its autonomy, seeing this as passively permitted rather than actively willed by God. At the same time, our free actions are not outside the wider scope of providence. In the long run, God's purposes will draw these into a wider cosmic harmony, whether through recovery or through retribution.[68]

The development of this position took place in close proximity to parallel debates around fatalism in the early phases of Islamic theology. John of Damascus was well acquainted with these. The affirmation of a comprehensive divine decree (*qadar*) raised questions about the extent of human determination by God's will. On one reading, this resulted in the intrusion into Islamic thought of an earlier Arab fatalism which was balanced by the more nuanced position of the Qur'an. In terms characteristic of the criticism of Stoic philosophy in the early church, Montgomery Watt represents this as a contrast between the theistic predestinarianism of the Qur'an and the pre-Islamic concept of an impersonal fatalism.[69] At any rate, Islamic thought was divided around the time of John of Damascus. The Qadarites argued robustly for human freedom, even to the extent of denying divine foreknowledge. This contrasted with

[68] See Andrew Louth, *St John Damascene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 140–3. In many respects, this Orthodox reading of providence is close to Jewish accounts of the matter which affirm a universal providence that leaves space for our free choices. As the Talmudic saying states, 'Everything is in the hand of heaven, except for the fear of heaven' (Berakhot 33b). Cited by Yehoshua M. Grintz, 'Providence: in the Talmud' in Skolnik, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. XVI, p. 649.

[69] W. Montgomery Watt, *Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam* (London: Luzac, 1948), pp. 19–29.

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the teaching of the Jabriyyah, who posited a strong divine determination in which the human will is 'like a feather in the breeze without any power of one's own'.[70] The writings of John of Damascus appear to take a mediating position, as do other Islamic schools. Though divine foreknowledge is comprehensive, God's will is not the cause of our free actions except in its concessionary mode. Nevertheless, the outcomes of our free actions are governed by a wise providence that imposes an order even upon the waywardness of the human will.

1.4 Conclusion

The assumption that the church shared providentialist beliefs with the philosophies of the ancient world led much of its teaching in the direction of Stoic fatalism. This was especially pronounced, as we shall see in the next chapter, in the Latin west. By contrast, the eastern tradition with its stronger libertarianism insisted against philosophies of fate on a thicker distinction between divine willing and permission. Some things are generally up to us – in such cases, God permits rather than wills. But, in general, the struggle against theories of chance and fortune helped to forge an alliance with philosophies of providence. Elements of Platonic and Stoic philosophy proved useful and seemed to resonant with much of what Christian writers wished to affirm of divine sovereignty. At the same time, these underwent some adjustment under the impact of scriptural interpretation. Divine providence as purposive, particular and parental was not to be confused with fate or fortune, and it induced a different set of practical attitudes.

[70] See Louth, *St John Damascene*, p. 81. For further discussion of the range of positions on predestination (*qadar*) and free will in Islam, see Majid Fakhry, *A History of Islamic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 56–81, and M. Abdel Haleem, 'Early *kalām*' in Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Oliver Leaman (eds.), *History of Islamic Philosophy*, Part 1 (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 71–88.

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Yet, notwithstanding these critical notes, the axis with classical philosophy was especially evident whenever providence was discussed. This was hardly surprising given the prominence of the concept in all the great Stoic thinkers. And, as the theology of providence became systematised in the Latin church of the Middle Ages, so these philosophical influences became increasingly apparent. Despite gestures towards revision and criticism, the resultant disposition was overall towards a determinism and passivity in constructions of providentialism. And these tended to restrict the diversity of scriptural materials and the distribution of providence across all three articles of the faith. Elements of struggle, resistance and interaction were increasingly difficult to accommodate as the concept of providence became anchored either to the doctrine of God or to the doctrine of creation. Without stronger Christological and pneumatological expressions of divine providence, the polyphonic witness of the scriptural tradition was always in danger of diminution.

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