A Review of Kenneth Keathley's Salvation and Sovereignty

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place it on the reading lists of Old Testament, Systematic Theology, and Hermeneutic courses. It should be included in the library of any person who teaches or studies the biblical text.

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Molinism seems to be a mere drop in the bucket of theological thought with little attention in Church history. Ken Keathley’s _Salvation and Sovereignty_ surely brings hope of resurgence to the little known school of thought. With an exemplary effort to reconcile some of the most difficult theological doctrines, Keathley demonstrates amazing consistency in his pursuit for a Biblical understanding of salvation and divine sovereignty. Just as the Calvinist has his TULIP so does the Molinist have his ROSES. The acronym may be understood as “R” for radical depravity, “O” for overcoming grace, “S” for sovereign election, “E” for eternal life, and “S” for singular redemption.

What is important about the Molinist approach is where Keathley begins. He commences his book by dispelling a popular misnomer of Molinism and should be commended for doing so. He aptly states, “If Molinism were simply the overlaying of a philosophical grid on top of Scripture, then it would be a very bad idea and should not be done” (19). Molinism embraces the doctrine of middle knowledge with a commitment to understanding that God sovereignly controls all things via his omniscience. It is assumed that God genuinely desires the salvation of all men and the sin of unbelief truly belongs to the unbeliever. Keathley adopts the antecedent/consequent paradigm to reconcile God’s universal salvific will and his will to condemn the reprobate. “God antecedently wills all to be saved. But for those who refuse to repent and believe, he consequently wills that they should be condemned” (58). After Keathley outlines his presuppositions he resumes his approach by bringing Molinism’s ROSES to full bloom.

Radical depravity affirms that soft libertarianism is the most plausible understanding of human freedom in a state of sin. Man derives his freedom from God as a gift, which reflects the divine image. The difference between total depravity and radical depravity is that, though sin affects the totality of man, he does not relinquish his freedom even though it has been affected by sin.
Overcoming grace is certainly the crux of Keathley’s framework and is due the most attention. The keystone for this doctrine is that God is the sole author and worker of salvation and damnation is only that of the sinner’s free rejection of God. In this model the only act the sinner can do is resist due to his depraved nature. God overcomes the sinner’s rebellion and the moment the sinner refrains from resisting the draw of the Spirit is the moment of regeneration. There is no cooperative effort or work the sinner does. The Holy Spirit brings the spiritually dead man to salvation not by anything the man does, but only by God’s grace that overcame the resistance while still rendering damnation solely because of man’s free rebellion and sin. With this understanding of grace Keathley has constructed a proper monergistic model of salvation while still affirming soft libertarian freedom.

Keathley’s understanding of sovereign election, which he calls “consistent infralapsarianism,” follows from his understanding of overcoming grace. Under this view, God elects all individuals who would freely cease to resist his saving grace. God will so arrange the world, via strong and weak actualizations, to bring about a person’s experiences and circumstances in which they would freely refrain from rejecting him. With this understanding of election, God is both sovereign in actualizing salvation and permissive in allowing the reprobates to go their own way. Keathley’s interpretation of Romans 9 is a historical rendition with little to no attention to the particular and individual aspect of the chapter. Though it is not necessary for Molinism to explain why God created this world, Keathley argues that Molinism is consistent with the existence of the elect and the reprobate. A particular shortfall of Keathley in this chapter on election is his response to the question, “Why does the reprobate exist”? In his attempt to distance himself from a theology he responds by restating it comfortingly at “God’s sovereign will.” Though that is true, it would have been beneficial to focus more attention on that question.

Keathley’s position on the doctrine of perseverance is that God has actualized a world where the elect are preserved by God and freely persevere in faith. Scriptural warnings are not only a means of perseverance but also tests of genuine belief. There is a possible world in which the elect do apostatize; however, this world is infeasible given the Scriptural warnings and preserving grace. Simply put, the saint cannot lose his salvation but he will not render it lost by apostatizing.

The last petal of Molinism’s ROSES attempts to answer the question, “For whom did Christ die?” Singular redemption is distanced from the general view of atonement, where salvation is obtained for all but secured for none. It is difficult to make a distinction between singular redemption and limited atonement. Both hold to the penal
substitutionary view of the atonement but Keathley adds that salvation is provided for all but only efficacious for those who believe, whereas limited atonement is only provided for and efficacious to the elect. Singular redemption provides atonement for the non-elect, but because of their unbelief the atonement serves as condemnation and testifies against them.

Keathley succeeds in making a minimalistic case for a Molinist approach to soteriology. He is quite modest and appears to avoid more philosophically oriented Molinist doctrines. It would have been beneficial to include an appendix or two with further implications of Molinism or even theodicies from a Molinist approach where readers could have inquired more about questions and mysteries that may still remain. Nonetheless, after reading this book it will be quite difficult to substantiate the accusation that Molinism is all philosophy and not a Biblically based school of thought because Keathley derives all of his arguments directly from Scripture. Keathley gives Calvinism and Arminianism a fair and honest representation and cites the leading scholars for each school, though he tends to discuss Calvinist matters more than Arminian.

It is hard not to be enthusiastic about this book and the positive impact it can have on the church. After reading the chapter on overcoming grace I could only respond with reverent worship and thankfulness that God pursued me in my sin and that he overcame my wicked rebellion. The arguments and concepts will engage both the scholar and the layperson. As a result, the church should expect to see more ROSES and, perhaps, less of the TULIP. Relative to the aggregate literature on Protestant soteriology, Molinism has very few texts. My hope is that Salvation and Sovereignty may become a fundamental source for studying Molinism and that it may be a catalyst for more work by scholars and church leaders. In light of this book, the church should seriously consider a Molinist approach in her pursuit for soteriological consistency.

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