

**The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence**, by John Sanders. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998. Pp. 367. Reviewed by John A. Battle.

Even though this volume appeared seven years ago, it remains the most thorough standard presentation and defense of the openness view of God. The author, John E. Sanders, is a professor of philosophy and religion at Huntington College in Indiana, and has also served as an Extraordinary Fellow at the University of Notre Dame Center for Philosophy of Religion. He recently survived an attempt to remove him from the Evangelical Theological Society for his novel views of Scripture and of God. In this book Sanders approaches his work from the standpoint of religious philosophy, but he also spends much effort defending his position in the areas of biblical exegesis, systematic theology, and pastoral ministry.

After explaining his basic position, Sanders seeks to demonstrate it and to defend it against objections arising from various areas of study: the Old Testament, the New Testament, historical theology, and systematic theology. He concludes with a lengthy discussion of practical conclusions and insights gained from the openness view of God.

Sanders begins his book by summarizing his position concerning the providence of God. He objects to the traditional definition of providence as God's "exhaustive control of all things." He rather prefers his own definition: "The word *providence* refers to the way God has chosen to relate to us and provide for our well-being" (p. 11). With this new definition (actually, a non-definition), Sanders can claim to believe in providence, while denying its traditional meaning. Actually, the way he has defined it, everyone who believes in a god at all can be said to believe in providence.

The tests Sanders employs to evaluate his and other doctrines are the following: public intelligibility, conceptual intelligibility, and adequacy for the demands of life. He maintains that his view of God will rescue the idea of God from a premature death. The old understandings are dying (at least in the academic circles Sanders travels in); a new, revived doctrine of providence will enable intelligent and sensitive people to still affirm it.

One point he belabors is that there are many statements in the Bible in which God is said to react to what humans do. He sees and hears them; he tests them to see what they will do; he is angry when they sin; he is sad and even frustrated when they turn aside from his good plans for them; he is pleased when they obey; he answers their prayers; he pleads with them to believe in him and obey him. All these passages, Sanders maintains, show us the true nature of God as open to us and responsive to us. We affect him. He is not static, unchanging, uninfluenced by us. Those passages that seem to teach the unchangeableness of God, Sanders insists, are few in number compared to the passages that show his responsiveness to us. Since Scripture cannot contradict itself, we should interpret those few passages to agree with the other, more numerous passages. Traditional theologians have called the "changeable God" passages "anthropomorphisms," figures of speech that describe God in human terms, to make the writing more dramatic or understandable. Sanders objects to this refuge of "anthropomorphisms." Rather, it is the "unchangeable God" passages that need to be reinterpreted. They show, he says, that God always has the same moral character, love, and faithfulness in all situations, while we

sinner fail to be consistent. They do not teach that God is unchangeable in some Greek philosophical sense, but that he is blessedly consistent in all his virtues.

Sanders builds the case for a “project” concept of the creation. God limits himself voluntarily as he creates and guides the universe and its inhabitants. Whether or not he was limited in this way before the creation Sanders is not willing to speculate. But he does strongly maintain that God’s limitations regarding us are a voluntary choice. God has made us as a sort of “project.” He subjects us to certain conditions, and waits to see what we will do. He wants us to know and love him. But he will not force us to do this. He does not even know ahead of time what we will do. He hopes for the best, but often is surprised, hurt, and frustrated when we don’t love him in return. He is “a God who risks.”

If God were to know ahead of time what we would do, then our freedom of choice would be compromised; and God regards our freedom as a nonnegotiable requirement. This is Arminianism with a vengeance. God does have complete knowledge of the past and the present, just not of the future. With this knowledge of the present, God can make pretty shrewd guesses as to what will happen. If necessary, he can arrange circumstances, or even interfere with a special miracle, but he tries to keep those at a minimum. And when things don’t go his way, he’s very resourceful at thinking of alternate plans. God’s really fast on his feet.

That’s what happened with Adam and Eve. God was surprised and saddened when Adam sinned, but he immediately thought of a solution—to have his Son die in the place of sinners. Then God could be confident that some humans, at least, would choose to believe in Christ and be saved, and that he could fellowship with them in eternity. So, while he does not know who will be saved or lost, he is pretty confident that things will turn out in the end overall. This enables him to make some prophecies in the Bible that will come true, although some of his prophecies failed to come true, due to unforeseen aberrations in someone’s free will. But we don’t need to worry—those were not the important prophecies.

Sanders exhibits a wide-ranging scholarship, but perhaps of limited depth. The authorities he quotes for support for various points (the book has over fifty pages of footnotes in small print) represent a very wide variety of scholarship. There seems to be little effort to distinguish traditional, orthodox theologians from modern, unorthodox, or postmodern theologians or philosophers. Although he discusses many biblical texts (the Scripture index is seven pages), he does not always present the strongest texts for the traditional view (e.g., Eph 1:11 is not discussed at all).

The portrait of God painted by John Sanders is so radically different from the God that Christians through the centuries have seen in the Bible, that we can say it is a different god altogether. Many of the arguments Sanders sets forth for this new concept of God are dealt with in articles in this issue of the *WRS Journal*. However, we can be grateful that he has presented this lengthy work defending this view. By bringing the various arguments for open theism into this full a discussion, Sanders has provided a helpful resource for those who wish to defend the traditional, and we would say Scriptural, teaching about the providence of God.