The Providence of God

I. Defining a Creative Construct

A. Biblical Data

1. Direct (sort of … Moule in *New IDoftheB*)

The idea of God’s sovereignty and providence is built from biblical statements that portray to us the nature and acts of God. The danger is reading the Bible and creating a God that fits our own theological pre-understandings.

* Divine teleology requires a way to arrive at pre-determined goals.
* Consequently, a continuum between fatalism and human choice exists.

The idea of providence is more of a group of themes than a linguistic idea (the actual term “providence” does not occur in the Bible). The term often noted is more about “foresight” than the eventual idea of “providence.” Providence, therefore, is a theological construct to account for how we define God and his relation to the world. The theme of covenant loyalty especially generates God’s care for his creation.

2. Implied (see Neusner, Leon-Dufour, Bavnick gives better proof texts than most sys theologians)

The Joseph narrative is particularly an illustration of God’s active care for history (Gen 37-45). The book of Esther provides another illustration; Daniel another.

3. Creative constructs (see below)

Take the statements of God’s care for his people and how the end times will play out and build a view of God’s cooperative orchestration of history.

B. Textbook Definitions

Vanhoozer (*Dict of Theo Interp*, 641ff.) rightly notes that ones view of the God-world relationship shapes ones definition of providence.

* affirming the existence of God requires a view of God-world relations
* one’s view of these relations defines the nature and extent of providence
* generally, the various gradations of arminianism will give creatures more weight
* extreme arminianism, namely “open theism,” with its belief that God does not know the future severely affects the idea of teleological providence
* generally, the various gradations of Calvinism will give God more weight while maintain an idea of “concurrence.”

1. Biblical theology

“God sustains the world that he has created and directs it to its appointed destiny.” (IVP NewDictofBibTheo, 711) “The providential sustenance of God is mentioned in many places, with the books of Job and Psalms providing a rich quarry of texts in the OT and Matthew 6:25-30 being a notable passage in the NT.” (711)

Exod 34:6-7

Job 10:12

Romans 8:28

Biblical theology (as opposed to systheo) notes that “The Bible is concerned not with the mechanics of divine sustaining and the causal ordering of nature but with the knowledge, power, will and manifest activity of God. God’s being and action is the basic reality which undergirds cosmos and history, and the biblical witness is interested in this fundamental fact rather than in its precise form and inner nature.” (IVP NDofBT, 711)

See the *New Dict of Bib Theo* note by Williams.

2. Systematic theology

“God’s works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful, preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions.” (Westminster Larger Catechism 18)

“Preservation and government are the two functions in the eternal providence of God.” This primarily applies to creation and preservation/sustaining it (= His purposes). (Shedd, 3rd Ed., 412)

“According to the Scriptures, preservation is the immediate operation of God as a distinct and different being upon, in and with the creature as a different and distinct being and always in accordance with the nature of the creature. In the material world, God immediately works in and through material properties and laws. In the mental world, God immediately works in and through the properties and faculties of mind.” see extened context! (413)

Providence relates to creation / preservation: rain falls, things grow, etc. God also preserved the “free” and “sinful” actions of human agents (414). On the hand God is in control (Prov 16:33) and on the other agents act ( ).

Providence relates to government: “The government of God in the physical universe is administered by means of physical laws.” (414; cf. Ps 103:19)

“The government of God in the mental world is administered (a) mediately through the properties and laws of mind and (b) immediately by the direct operation of the Holy Spirit. Moral agents are goverened and controlled by all the varieties of moral influence, such as circumstances, motives, instruction, persuasion, and example, and also by the personal efficiency of the Holy Spirit upon the heart and will.” (415) QUES: what does this last stmt about the HS mean? Answered under his doc of the Spirit?

“Providence is not merely foreknowledge but involves God’s active will ruling all things and includes preservation, concurrence, and government.” (Bavnick, 2.591)

Bavnick notes that the term “concurrence” was introduced to own “secondary causality” as God’s way in nature and to maintain “human responsibility.” (591) This is God’s will for ordering his world. “Concurrence” was introduced to avoid pantheism and Deism.

“If God really maintains and governs the world, he must have foreknowledge of it (*providentia*), will it, and be able to care for it (*prudential*), and also actually so preserve and govern it in time that the end he had in mind would be attained.” (597)

The “concurrence” piece of providence maintains “two causes, though they are totally dependent on the primary cause, are at the same time also true and essential causes. With his almighty power God makes possible every secondary cause and is present in it with his being at its beginning, progression and end. It is he who posits it and makes it move into action (*praecursus*) and who further accompanies it in its working and leads it to its effect (*concursus*). He is ‘at work’ [in us] ‘both to wil and to do for his good pleasure’ (Phil. 2:13). But this energizing activity of the primary cause in the secondary causes is so divinely great that precisely by that activity he stirs those secondary causes into an activity of their own. ‘The providence of God does not cancel out but posits secondary causation.’” (Bavinck, 614) **See this whole paragraph**… he goes on to assert that primary causality does not obviate secondary causality and that they remain distinct. Secondary causes are not merely dressing but real causality.

John of Damascus described providence as “that will of God by which all existing things receive suitable guidance through to their end” (*Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, II.29; cited by Bavnick, 2.596) In this sense, providence participates in the decrees of God.

“Hence, according to Scriptue and the church’s confession, providence is that act of God by which from moment to moment he preserves and governs all things. It is not only to ‘see for’ (*fursehung*) but also to ‘foresee’ (*Vorsehung*).” (Bavinck, 2.596)

II. Relation to “sovereignty”

“Providence” is the outworking of sovereignty.

III. Questions this study raises about the problem of knowledge and discerning God’s will

IV. Application of “providence” within a model of “knowing God’s will”

Cf. other note packs provided.