

## BOOK REVIEW

of

D.A. Carson,

*Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*,  
Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002 [Baker Books, 1994].

This book is in the Evangel Library,  
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

One of the areas of greatest disagreement among Christians, and debated over the centuries, is divine sovereignty versus human responsibility. The understanding of these issues impacts one's perspective on predestination, freedom of the will, sanctification, and even salvation. D.A. Carson's contribution is a careful and detailed study that shows that the Bible teaches both, that God is sovereign, and that we are held accountable for our actions and our beliefs.

D.A. Carson is a professor of new testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and is a prolific writer. The book under review is the outgrowth of his doctoral dissertation at Cambridge University, defended in 1975. The first edition was published in 1978, and the second in 1994, which was reprinted in 2002. Since the book is derived from a doctoral dissertation, it is scholarly in its approach, yet it has been written at a level accessible by the general Christian public and it has been well received.

The book has four parts and a total of 13 chapters. After an introductory chapter, Part One is The Sovereignty-Responsibility Tension in the Hebrew Canon and contains two chapters. Chapter 2 is Selected Old Testament Passages, and Chapter 3 is Broad Motifs in the Old Testament. Part Two is The Sovereignty-Responsibility Tension in Intertestamental Jewish Literature and contains 7 chapters. Chapter 4 is The Septuagint Translation. Chapter 5 is Non-Apocalyptic Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha. Chapter 6 is Intertestamental Apocalyptic. Chapter 7 is The Dead Sea Scrolls. Chapter 8 is The Targums and Rabbinic Literature. Chapter 9 is Josephus. Chapter 10 is Concluding Observations. Part Three is The Sovereignty-Responsibility Tension in the Gospel of John and contains two chapters. Chapter 11 is The Broad Dimensions. Chapter 12 is The Soteriology of John. Part Four is Theological Reflections and contains one chapter. Chapter 13 is The Formulation of the Tension.

In the Introduction, Carson explains why the sovereignty-responsibility issue is so basic to Christianity. It is not such an issue in pagan, and other non-Christian, religions, as God, or the gods, are not believed to be sovereign, and therefore there is no tension. But in Christianity, "It lies at the heart of questions about the nature of God, and it poses difficult conundra about the meaning of human 'freedom'. The most common questions it raises are well known. If God is absolutely sovereign, in what sense can we meaningfully speak of human choice, of human will?" "To explore this tension is to explore the nature of God and his ways with men."

In Chapter 2, Carson considers how this tension is presented in the Old Testament. Carson quotes from Leviticus 20:8 and 22:32: "I am the Lord who sanctifies you," and notes that Leviticus "drums with the demand to be holy." "Yahweh himself is to be credited with sanctifying the people. Clearly, that Yahweh is the sanctifier does not relieve the Israelites of their responsibility to sanctify themselves; and conversely, that responsibility does not entail Yahweh's passivity in their sanctification." "That the behavior of Rehoboam was foolish, immature, harsh and unsympathetic cannot be doubted. Nevertheless, the entire event – including Rehoboam's folly – is attributed to a 'turn of affairs' (1 Kgs. 12.15; 2 Chr. 10.15) from Yahweh." Commenting on Isaiah 10:5ff, Carson writes "Yahweh's sovereignty over the nations is highlighted in the most absolute terms. He it is who sends Assyria against his people to punish them for their wickedness. He manipulates nations the way men manipulate tools (10.15); and hence it is the most pompous arrogance to suppose one may act independently of him." "The really heinous crime of Assyria, for which there is to be a most rigorous accounting, is her attitude of self-congratulating independence. The king's arrant boasting fails to acknowledge the real source of Assyria's strength: Yahweh himself (10.13ff)."

In Chapter 3, Carson writes that, in spite of Yahweh's sovereignty over all things, "human responsibility is presupposed", "men are exhorted to seek the Lord", "although election brought high privilege to Israel, it also laid heavy responsibility on her," the "prophets especially make it clear that the privilege of election by Yahweh brings with it extensive demands on his people." But again, with those demands, and the implied responsibility, "It is difficult to conceive how Yahweh could thus control even the details of history unless he controls the minds and emotions of men. And in fact, the Old Testament writers do not hesitate to describe events in precisely those terms." "Yahweh gives the *command* to make the hearts of the people insensitive, their ears dull and their eyes dim (Isa. 6.9f.). But the Old Testament writers in such cases seem to presuppose that this is nothing other than due judgment; while elsewhere *self-hardening* is pictured as reprehensible action for which the person is morally accountable (Zech. 7.11; Prov. 28.14)."

Part Two is on intertestamental sources, and shows the development of thought on the sovereignty-responsibility tension among Jewish people. This is actually a rather lengthy part of the book, but since it is on extrabiblical sources, I will not comment here.

In Chapter 11, Carson writes that the sovereignty-responsibility tension reaches a climax in Jesus Christ. Who could be more "free" than the Son of God? But what could be more determined than what was set from before the foundation of the world: His life and death? "In Jesus, therefore, the certainty of divine predestination and the significant freedom of obedient response meet in a spectacular display." Carson favorably quotes from A. Richardson: "It is in the life and death of Jesus Christ that the problem of free will and predestination finds its most poignant expression, and here, too, if anywhere, it must find its solution. The predetermined one freely chooses his appointed destiny: 'not what I will, but what thou wilt' (Mark 14.36). In Christ, the elect of God, perfect freedom and absolute determination intersect; human freedom and divine omnipotence meet and are one. The problem of free will and determination can be solved only in the new humanity of Jesus Christ." This is a point made much earlier by Jonathan Edwards, in his book *Freedom of the Will*. Carson continues, "Real freedom for a man is freedom from sin (8.34ff.), that is, a freedom which voluntarily performs God's will, in the way Jesus kept his Father's word (8.54)."

In Chapter 12, Carson writes "for John responsibility does not turn on an *absolute* power to contrary. The world chooses, but by itself it cannot (because it will not) choose the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Responsibility depends more on reasonable obligation than on *absolute* freedom." ... "This strikes at the very root of merit theology."

In Chapter 13, Carson writes that "I would be prepared to argue that any christian leader's handling of the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility will affect large areas of his theological understanding, evangelical practices, and ecclesiastical methods." While there may be no completely satisfying rational solutions to the sovereignty-responsibility tension for us mortals, Carson has made it clear that God's sovereignty and man's responsibility are both clearly taught in Scripture. For the Christian, while it may be interesting and profitable to study and ponder these issues, faith requires that we adhere to the clearly taught doctrines of Scripture that God is sovereign and we are responsible and will be held accountable. Naturalism holds no hope for any true human freedom or responsibility, as Post-Modernism admits, but our Holy Faith assures us that God in His sovereignty has created us in His image, with a freedom and responsibility that does not contradict His sovereignty. Holy be His Name.