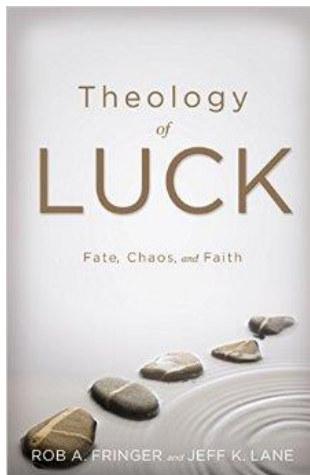


Rob A. Fringer and Jeff K. Lane, *Theology of Luck: Fate, Chaos, and Faith* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2015), 192 pp.



Paul Tillich was a twentieth century theologian who railed against the futility of a faith that provided answers to the questions nobody is asking. In developing his theological position Tillich was very aware of the divide between the average Christian and the academic theologians in their ivory towers turning out their abstract tomes. I think in the *Theology of Luck* we have two contemporary theologians who are attempting to bridge the divide, to bring theology down to earth and to answer questions that people are asking.

Right from the outset Rob Fringer and Jeff Lane seek to respond to the concern that there is a hiatus in the contemporary church between theology and praxis, belief and action. They set out to tackle this problem head on and rather than assuming that the problem is with culture, or with the faith of believers, they begin with the idea that perhaps the problem lies with our

view of God.

To illustrate this point Fringer and Lane in the beginning of their book tell the story of Urbaal and his wife Timna taken from James Michener's novel *The Source*. Urbaal and Timna live in a town called Makor around 2202 BC. With the threat of war looming Timna's firstborn son is chosen along with seven other firstborns to be sacrificed to the God of Melak – the god of death and war. Timna is a foreigner and doesn't believe in her adopted culture's gods and is horrified at the prospect of losing her son in this way. Timna wants her husband to rebel against the priests or to flee from Makor to save their son. To complicate matters for Urbaal, his act of obedience in offering his son for sacrifice has put him in the running to win the yearly Astarte contest. Astarte is the god of fertility and each year a lucky man wins the privileges of spending a week with a 16 year old virgin who has been selected as the newest temple prostitute. Urbaal in fact wins his prize and as Timna walks away she understands with painful insight that "with different gods her husband Urbaal would have been a different man" Fringer and Lane work on the premise that our practice does ultimately flow from our view of God and further that perhaps the church in the 21st century is suffering less from a crisis of faith than a breakdown in its plausibility structures – and in particular the view of God it presents to the world.

The authors of *Theology of Luck* do set out to tackle some fundamental questions: What kind of God do we believe in? How does this God act? And what is our response to this God? To the question, "What kind of God is this?" Fringer and Lane set out two traditional views of God and then offer a third for our consideration. Firstly there is the interventionist God of control otherwise referred to as the sovereign God. This is the God of classical theism. This is the God that brings everything to pass in line with his perfect will and plan. Secondly there is the God of passivity. This is the God of Deism. This is the clockmaker God who has wound the world clock up as it were and has taken a vacation leaving things to play out in line with the laws of nature.

But the authors want us to consider a third option - the God of relationship. This God is neither controlling nor standoffish but seeks to actively engage with the world. This is the God who risks Godself in creating free agents because the outcome is not always certain and it is always possible that we could mess things up. Between a controlling God and a God who doesn't see the need to get involved we have a God who invites us to participate with him in fulfilling the work of ongoing creation and recreation.

The problem with both the God of control and the God of passivism is that both assume a closed deterministic system in which ultimately everything turns out exactly as it should and human freedom is

seemingly excluded. If one person survives a typhoon and 7000 more are killed do we celebrate this as a miracle for the one or is there actually something a bit odd about a God who can rescue one and not extend his hand to rescue the other 7000. This is not helped by the notion that even in light of such catastrophes, in God's economy everything will be just as it should be. Many Christians ignore the fact that when they celebrate the miracle of the one they are really also acknowledging that that same God is responsible for the deaths of the 7000. Fringer and Lane ask the question "If God is not to be given credit for the rescue and not to be blamed for the deaths, then what other options are there"? This is where the idea of Luck comes into play.

Now I imagine that it is at this point that some eyebrows may be raised. The authors use terms like luck, chaos and chance to cope with the paradox of a reality that exhibits both free will and determinism. I should point out though that Fringer and Lane are not alone in proposing such paradoxical language to deal with the complexity of an open system. Modern science itself uses terms such as randomness and indeterminacy to deal with this same paradox.

To the question "How does God act"? the authors set out the options. The first is of a God who can be controlled - by way of manipulation or magic. Think of some of the prayers that have been uttered in dire situations - "If you save me from this terrible situation I will serve you the rest of my life". Consider the superstitions that can inform our actions. Going to church regularly and serving faithfully will keep me on the good side of God.

Then there is the controlling God. This is the God that you cannot argue against. This God brings about all things in line with his will and purpose. If there is to be an ecological cataclysm or a nuclear war then there is no use trying to stop it. Human action to bring about a different state of affairs is ruled out.

Fringer and Lane though present us with another way that God acts in the world. This is the God who invites us into relationship, who invites us to participate with him and in him in the ongoing work of creation and recreation. In the words of the authors, "a theology of luck calls for people to share in the mysterious movement of God's desires in the world."

To the question "what is our response to this God"? Fringer and Lane suggest that our response to God is not like being on the hunt for our destiny or simply along for the ride. Rather our response to God is better described as going after life, making choices, seizing the day, knowing that God is with us in this adventure we call life. No absolute certainties but the promise of a dynamic and wonderful life-giving relationship.

Now in respect to the primary thesis of *Theology of Luck* I find myself in general agreement. The question of the adequacy of our various accounts of God is a significant one for our time and will no doubt become more pressing given further developments in science and other disciplines. That being said, I would make the following observations. In addressing our picture of God I think it is important to speak of these as more or less adequate accounts rather than as true or false accounts. Any talk of true and false accounts seems to imply some sort of essentialism. That is, that there is a true picture of God, that it is possible to find that true picture, and, further, that we can find that true picture if we give sufficient attention to the Scriptures. Fringer and Lane make the statement in the beginning of the book that we have fully embraced a false picture of God and then further on set out their task as deconstructing false pictures of God. They also identify as their task the presentation of a more Scriptural picture of God. There does seem to be an assumption of essentialism here. Which Scriptural picture we might ask? I think it is always more helpful to speak of more or less adequate pictures of God. Epistemological humility after all does seem to be an important and appropriate characteristic of postmodernity.

A further and related comment is that while any presentation of a more adequate view of God will involve us searching the Scriptures it will also require us to give due attention to other sources of our theology.

Now Fringer and Lane do acknowledge at the beginning of their book that in the theological task we must consider the sources of Scripture, Tradition, Reason and Experience. However, they then go on to focus primarily on Scripture as the source of their proposal. I think their proposal would have benefited from a wider engagement with the other sources but in particular that of reason. I for one believe that the philosophical and scientific traditions are able to provide good resources for making their case for an alternative view of God.

Now to be fair to Fringer and Lane it must be acknowledged that they are writing primarily as biblical scholars and theologians and not as scientists or philosophers. However, because the very idea of luck in relation to the workings of God is so controversial to begin with, it would seem prudent to show how contemporary science and philosophy aids the case of arriving at a more adequate view of God. Modern science uses terms like chaos, randomness and indeterminacy and these have become common parlance in the new physics. I don't doubt that the authors have recognized the fact that we have moved on from the Newtonian scientific world-view and a move to a post-Newtonian, relational view of God aligns much more closely with the current scientific world-view. However, I believe their case would have bolstered by incorporating some reference to this shift in their account.

This oversight can be seen in the way that the authors on the one hand are keen to explore a more adequate view of God in the context of an open and relational system of the world, but then continue to use the language belonging to a closed system. In exploring the paradox of free will and determinism and acknowledging that free can both impede other's freedom and ultimately the outcome of a system that is open and relational, the authors make the following claim; "Furthermore, there is the reality that God is still active in the world and that, at points along the timeline, God *will* intervene in order to help bring about God's master plan of redemption and restoration of creation." In respect to the development of their notion of God it does appear that the authors want to have two bob each way. Is it not the notion of an intervening God that has created the theological problems the authors are seeking to address in their book in the first place? If God can intervene under certain circumstances to bring about God's master plan, then why does he not intervene to overcome enormous suffering even at the cost of overriding some personal freedoms. Even in western democratic societies we expect our governments to do this for the good of the many so why should we not expect God to do the same? But human experience tells against this and so we are back where Fringer and Lane started in exploring an alternative view of God.

While I have identified what I consider to be some logical flaws in *Theology of Luck* I do not want to take away from the achievement of the authors. Fringer and Lane have tackled a very complex topic and have brought to light a question that is both significant and relevant for our time. A rethinking of our view of God may well turn out to characterize the theological landscape for some time to come. During times of theological transition we cannot expect absolute clarity due to the fact that we are grappling towards a more adequate worldview. I for one am grateful to Fringer and Lane for being courageous enough to articulate the concerns many of us have about the traditional view of God and to outline an alternative, albeit hesitatingly provisional.

I also want to register my appreciation to the authors for seeking to engage with thinking Christians and non-Christians alike. There is much written on this topic for academic theologians and philosophers but much less has been written for non-academics. It would seem that often the only choice one has had in this regard is highly abstract theological tomes or the unbearable lightness of much popular theology. But here we have a book by authors who have sought to engage with the difficult questions, and might I add, the ones people are genuinely asking. The ultimate question their book poses is this: "With a different God would we be different people"? I highly recommend this book to you and congratulate Rob and Jeff on their achievement.

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