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## **God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom in the Old Testament: A Historical and Theological Analysis of Divine Will and Human Agency**

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### ***Abstract***

*This study employs a qualitative and analytical approach using historical-critical and biblical-theological methods to examine the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom in the Old Testament. This topic is significant in theology because it helps clarify human moral responsibility within God's divine plan. The historical-critical approach investigates the historical background, redaction processes, and socio-political influences that shaped these concepts, while the biblical-theological method focuses on key texts to uncover their theological significance. The findings reveal that God's sovereignty does not override human freedom but instead defines its boundaries within the framework of divine law and covenant. Old Testament narratives illustrate a dynamic interaction between human free will and God's sovereign will in Israel's history of salvation. This research contributes to Old Testament theology by offering new insights into the balance between divine authority and human agency. Additionally, it provides a relevant perspective for contemporary theological discussions, particularly in understanding human freedom within the Christian faith.*

***Keywords:*** *God's Sovereignty; Human Freedom; Free Will; Historical-Critical; Biblical-Theological*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The sovereignty of God and human freedom are two profoundly significant concepts in the understanding of Old Testament theology. On one hand, God's will manifest God's supreme authority and infinite wisdom, unbound by anything, governing all of creation and the course of human history. On the other hand, human

freedom signifies the individual's inherent capacity to make choices and act in a morally and rationally responsible manner, which forms the foundation of human accountability before God. In contemporary Christian theology, the tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom has often led to fatalistic interpretations, wherein God's absolute control is perceived to nullify human responsibility. Such

perspectives risk undermining the moral and spiritual agency of believers, potentially leading to confusion regarding ethical accountability and the role of human decision-making. This paper seeks to address and critically reassess these fatalistic tendencies by exploring how the Old Testament presents a more dynamic and balanced interaction between God's sovereign will and human freedom. The relationship between these two concepts has given rise to profound theological tensions, as seen in the Old Testament's own narratives of human choice within God's sovereign framework. For example, the paradoxical accounts of Pharaoh's hardened heart in Exodus, or Israel's cyclical apostasy in Judges.<sup>1</sup> This research explores the depiction of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human freedom in the Old Testament, taking into account both historical and theological perspectives. It seeks to analyze how these two concepts interact and what this interaction reveals about the nature of God's will and human responsibility.<sup>2</sup> The key questions the study seeks to address are: How do Old Testament texts present the interaction between God's sovereignty and human freedom? How was human freedom

understood in ancient Israelite theology, and how did this influence the identity of God's chosen people? And finally, what role does human freedom play in the broader salvation narrative found in the Old Testament?

This study focuses on a historical-critical and biblical-theological examination of the relationship between God's will and human freedom in the Old Testament. As the first part of the Bible, The Old Testament presents a narrative of how God interacts with, elects, and bestows laws and promises upon the covenant community. In this context, it is important to investigate how the texts of the Old Testament depict the tension between God's will that shapes history and human freedom that allows for moral choices.<sup>3</sup> The historical-critical approach makes an important contribution to understanding the historical background and social context behind the writing of the Old Testament texts.

Through this approach, it is possible to explore in greater depth how the people of Israel understood their relationship with God during various periods of history, from the patriarchal era to the Babylonian exile. Additionally, it is possible to analyze how

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<sup>1</sup> Antoinette L. Grace Katuuk et al., "What the Bible Says About Education: A Critical Review of Biblical Education and Its Relevance in the Era of Globalization" 7, no. 3 (2024): 108-118.

<sup>2</sup> Laura W. Ekstrom, *God, Suffering, and*

*the Value of Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 37-38.

<sup>3</sup> Djoko Sukono, "Alkitab: Pernyataan Allah yang Diilhamkan," *Pasca: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 15, no. 1 (2019): 28-34.

the concept of human freedom was understood within the framework of ancient Israelite theology, which played a significant role in the formation of the identity of God's chosen people.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the biblical-theological approach offers a more systematic and hermeneutical view of the teachings contained in the Old Testament texts regarding God's will and human freedom. By referring to Bible passages that focus on God's actions and the responses of God's people, it becomes evident how these two concepts interact within the broader framework of salvation. For example, the creation story in the Book of Genesis illustrates God's will in creating humans with the freedom to choose between good and evil, while the covenants made with figures like Abraham and Moses highlight the freedom of the people of Israel to choose whether to obey or rebel against God.<sup>5</sup>

The study seeks to analyze how God's sovereignty and human freedom interact, not only in the individual lives of the Israelites but also within the broader story of God's covenant with God's people. Based on this exploration, the following

hypotheses are proposed. Main hypothesis: The Old Testament demonstrates that God's sovereignty and human freedom are not contradictory, but instead, God's sovereignty and human freedom complement one another in God's divine plan of salvation. This plan encompasses both God's absolute control over history and the genuine freedom granted to humanity to make choices. Secondary hypothesis: While human freedom provides individuals with the ability to make choices, these choices ultimately remain within the larger framework of God's sovereign will. This ensures that God's purposes and the unfolding of His salvation plan are never disrupted by human actions, even when human freedom is exercised.

Through this study, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how God's sovereignty and human freedom function together within the broader narrative of the Old Testament, highlighting the ways in which these theological themes continue to shape Christian thought today.

The relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom has been a longstanding topic within theological

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<sup>4</sup> Tirta Susila and Latupeirissa Risvan, "Reconstructing the Formation of Israel's Religion in the Context of Old Testament Biblical Text," *Khazanah Theologia* 4, no. 2 (2022): 117–134.

<sup>5</sup> Freddy Manurung and Alwyn Cesariato

Hendriks, "Covenant and Salvation in the Old Testament: Examining the Role of Covenants in the Old Testament as Mechanisms for Salvation, Considering the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic Covenants," *Jurnal Koinonia* 16, no. 2 (2024): 1–15.

discourse, particularly as reflected in the Old Testament narratives. The Old Testament consistently portrays a dynamic tension wherein human choices unfold within the sovereign purposes of God. Previous research often highlights this tension, especially through the depiction of figures such as Pharaoh, the judges of Israel, and the covenant people's repeated cycles of obedience and rebellion. This study aims to explore how this tension is theologically articulated within the Old Testament itself, rather than through later doctrinal developments.

Yet, despite extensive research, such as Sitanggang on Augustine and Calvin's views<sup>6</sup> and Boaheng on divine sovereignty and human responsibility,<sup>7</sup> most studies have focused on doctrinal debates rather than directly examining this tension within the historical and theological context of the Old Testament. As a result, a notable gap remains in understanding how God's sovereignty and human freedom are integrated within the Old Testament's salvation narrative. This study seeks to address that gap by examining key biblical texts that illustrate how the people of Israel understood the interplay between God's sovereign will and human moral

responsibility, thereby contributing a contextualized and integrative understanding to the field of salvation theology.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative methodology, incorporating both historical-critical and biblical-theological approaches. The historical-critical method investigates the historical background of Old Testament texts, with a particular focus on the Torah and the Prophetic Books. This approach is informed by a theoretical framework that views biblical writings as products of specific historical, cultural, and religious contexts. Roy B. Zuck, in his book "Basic Bible Interpretation", emphasizes that understanding the historical context is essential for accurate interpretation of Scripture, as the meaning of a biblical passage is closely tied to the circumstances in which it was originally written.<sup>8</sup> This study examines the socio-political context, editorial developments, and cultural factors that contributed to the formation of ancient Israelite theology. Drawing from the work of Cynthia Edenburg, Francis Borchardt, Jason M. Silverman, and Juha Pakkala in

<sup>6</sup> Murni H. Sitanggang, "Kehendak Bebas Manusia Menurut Augustine Dan Calvin Dalam Kaitannya Dengan Kedaulatan Allah," *Jurnal Teologi Gracia Deo* 1, no. 1 (2018), 35-36.

<sup>7</sup> Isaac Boaheng, "Divine Sovereignty, Human Responsibility and God's Salvific Plan: An

African Perspective," *Erats: Journal of Religius and Theological Studies* 1, no. 3 (September 2019): 84-93.

<sup>8</sup> Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2023), 10-15.

their book “Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions: Methodological Encounters and Debates”, historical-critical research seeks to reconstruct the original life setting (*Sitz im Leben*) of a text to better understand its intended meaning within its own historical context.<sup>9</sup> Conversely, the biblical-theological approach seeks to explore theological themes that emerge from within the canonical Scriptures. As presented by Scott Stine in “Christ and Theology: Toward Typological Realism, a Synthetic Approach to Biblical Theology”, this method views the Bible not merely as a collection of historical writings but as an integrated theological.<sup>10</sup> This approach is especially attentive to how these themes are expressed within the canonical context, emphasizing theological coherence and the broader narrative framework of Scripture. This study focuses on key passages from the *Torah* that lay the foundation for divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It also analyzes selected texts from the *Prophetic Books* to understand how the prophets interpreted these themes in their historical context. Textual criticism is used to evaluate variations across manuscripts and to assess how such differences may

affect interpretation. Furthermore, hermeneutical principles are applied to discern the meaning of the texts within both their historical and theological settings. By integrating historical-critical and biblical-theological methodologies, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the interaction between God's sovereignty and human freedom in the Old Testament.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### Theological Foundations of Sovereignty and Free Will

The relationship between God's sovereignty and human free will has been a central topic in Christian theology, especially in the context of the Old Testament, where the Scriptures consistently portray God's sovereign purposes unfolding alongside genuine human choices. From Adam and Eve's exercise of free will in Eden (Gen 3), to Abraham's faithful response to divine calling (Gen 12; 15), and Israel's continual struggle between covenant loyalty and disobedience (Deut 30:15–20), the Old Testament reflects a dynamic tension

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<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Edenburg et al., *Changes in Sacred Texts and Traditions: Methodological Encounters and Debates*, ed. Martti Nissinen and Jutta Jokiranta (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2024), 23–26.

<sup>10</sup> Scott Stine, *Christ and Theology: Toward Typological Realism, a Synthetic Approach to Biblical Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2025), 1–2.

between divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Understanding the theological foundations of these two concepts requires a careful examination of how the Bible portrays both God's supreme authority and humanity's capacity to choose within the framework of divine providence. This section explores the biblical basis for God's sovereignty and human freedom, highlighting how these themes are interconnected yet remain distinct within the Old Testament narrative.

Old Testament theology is renowned for its doctrine of God's sovereignty, which asserts that God is the supreme ruler and sustainer of all creation. From the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, it is clear that God's will governs the order of creation. In (Gen 1:1) "*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*" the creation of the heavens and the earth is not merely a historical event, but an expression of God's power, where God's 'word' brings everything into existence.<sup>11</sup> Divine sovereignty encompasses not only the act of creation but also includes God's rule over the nations and active participation in the historical unfolding of Israel.<sup>12</sup> For example, in the Exodus narrative, God declares God's supremacy

over Pharaoh, stating that God raised Pharaoh specifically to demonstrate God's power (Exod 9:16) "*but for this purpose have I let you live, to show you my power, so that my name may be declared throughout all the earth*". This theme is reinforced by the prophets, such as Isaiah, who repeatedly emphasize that God is the only one who controls history and orchestrates events according to His will (Isa 46:9-10) "*Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand and I will accomplish all my purpose*"

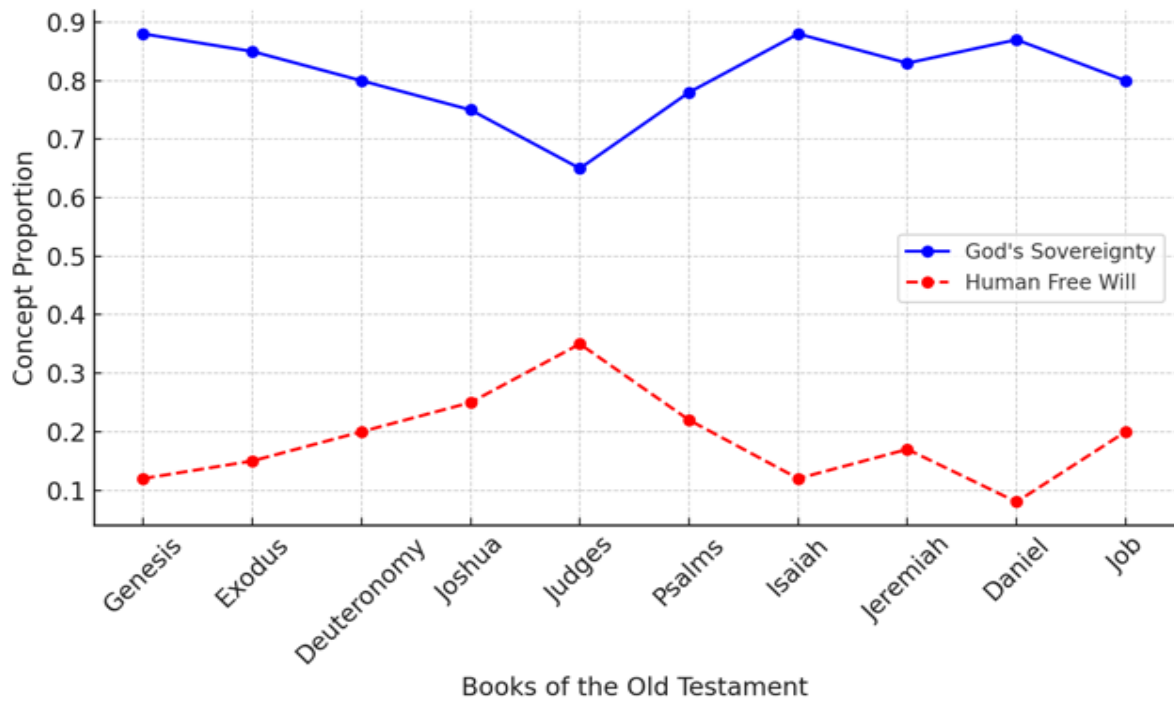
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<sup>11</sup> Darwis L Laana and Timothius Theodori Laana, "Creation Studies: The Beginning of Heaven and Earth Based on Genesis 1:1-2," *Ambassadors: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristiani* 2, no. 1

(June 30, 2021): 203–216.

<sup>12</sup> Edward D. Andrews, *The Egyptian Empire: Its Role in Biblical History* (Dayton: Christian Publishing House, 2025), 51–55.

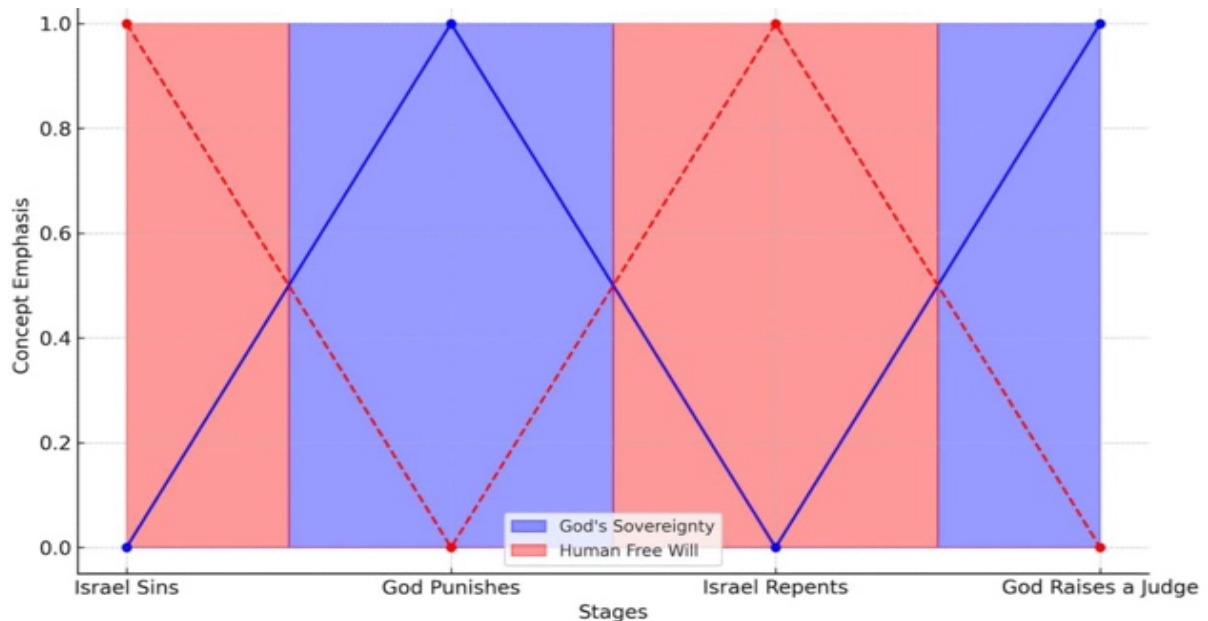
Chart 1. God's Sovereignty vs Human Free Will in Old Testament



The Book of Judges describes the time after Joshua's death, when Israel no longer had centralized leadership. As a result, the phrase "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 17:6; 21:25) is

repeated several times. This highlights how human freedom—acting according to one's own will—became a key characteristic of the period. The book follows a recurring cycle.

Chart 2. Cycle of Israel in Judges: Human Free Will and God's Sovereignty



The figure presents the dynamic relationship between human free will and divine sovereignty across four critical stages in Israel's historical cycle, as depicted in the Book of Judges. The x-axis traces the sequence—Israel Sins, God Punishes, Israel Repents, and God Raises a Judge—while the y-axis measures the relative emphasis on each theme, from 0 to 1. The Book of Judges vividly portrays human freedom in choosing either obedience or rebellion. Although divine sovereignty remains the overarching framework throughout the Old Testament, Judges uniquely emphasizes the significant role of human free will in shaping Israel's history, more explicitly than many other biblical texts. At the stage of Israel's sin, human free will reaches its highest point, reflecting Israel's deliberate abandonment of God's commandments in favor of foreign gods. Divine sovereignty, by contrast, appears subdued, highlighting God's forbearance in allowing human choice. During the phase of divine punishment, human free will sharply diminishes as God's sovereignty becomes dominant. This shift signifies God's active intervention, permitting foreign oppression as a consequence of Israel's disobedience. In the stage of Israel's repentance, human free will rises once more as the people

consciously cry out for deliverance. Divine sovereignty, though still present, recedes slightly to accommodate genuine human initiative. Finally, when God raises a judge, divine sovereignty again assumes prominence. God takes the initiative in appointing and empowering a deliverer, affirming His ultimate authority over Israel's restoration.

Within this cycle, human freedom plays a crucial role, as individuals and the nation as a whole are confronted with the choice to remain faithful to God or to turn away from God.<sup>13</sup>

The absence of centralized leadership allowed each Israelite tribe to govern itself without strict religious or governmental oversight. This created greater space for human autonomy in decision-making, both on an individual and communal level. Unlike the eras of Moses and Joshua, where leadership was directly mandated by God, the judges emerged solely as temporary deliverers in times of crisis. They lacked absolute legislative or executive authority, granting the people greater freedom in their daily lives.

### **Divine Sovereignty in Creation and Human History**

At the beginning of Genesis, God's sovereignty is revealed through the creation

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<sup>13</sup> Corin Mihaila, "Creation, Sin, and Israel: An Old Testament Biblical Theological Perspective

on Creation Care," *Dialogo* 10, no. 1 (2023): 159-172.

of the world. With God's word, God created the heavens and the earth, separated light from darkness, and shaped the world according to God's perfect will (Gen 1). This act of creation shows God's absolute authority over the universe. Yet, even though everything unfolds according to God's will, God created human beings in God's image (Gen 1:26) "*Then God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.*" God entrusted humans with the freedom to care for God's creation. In this sense, people have the ability to make choices and act, but always within the bounds of God's sovereignty. This reveals a profound paradox: God is the sovereign Creator of everything, yet God grants humans the freedom to make moral decisions. This freedom is at the core of God's relationship with humanity.<sup>14</sup>

The tension between God's sovereignty and human freedom becomes especially clear in the story of Adam and Eve's fall (Gen 3). While God gave them the

freedom to choose, their decision to disobey God command brought sin into the world and broke the relationship between humanity and God. From both a historical and theological perspective, this fall shows that, although human freedom is a gift from God, it can be misused. But this doesn't take away from God's sovereignty. Even in the face of human rebellion, God remains in control, working out God's plan for restoration and salvation.<sup>15</sup>

A compelling illustration of the interplay between divine sovereignty and human freedom is found in the narrative of Noah. In a world overwhelmed by wickedness, God chose to bring judgment through a great flood (Gen 6–9). Although humanity was granted the freedom to choose, their persistent sinfulness led to severe consequences. Nevertheless, God's sovereignty is evident in the preservation of Noah and his family, culminating in the establishment of a new covenant following the subsiding of the floodwaters.<sup>16</sup> The story of Abraham in Genesis 12 aids in clarifying the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom. God called Abraham to leave his homeland and follow God's

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<sup>14</sup> Vianny Bere and Delorens Lorentje Naomi Bessie, "Human Free Will and God's Sovereignty in Biblical and Human Rights Perspectives," *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies* 4, no. 6 (2023): 50–65.

<sup>15</sup> Susianti Zega, "Konsep Paradoks: Kedaulatan Allah Dan Kebebasan Manusia

Perspektif Teologi Reformed," *Diligentia: Journal of Theology and Christian Education* 5, no. 3 (2023): 135–140.

<sup>16</sup> Andrew A. Snelling, *The Genesis Flood Revisited* (Green Forest: Master Books, 2022), 65–70.

plan to make him the father of many nations. Here, it becomes evident how human freedom functions within God's sovereign plan. Although God called Abraham, there remained the freedom to respond.<sup>17</sup> Abraham's decision to follow God's call set in motion a larger covenant that would shape the nation of Israel. Through Abraham, God began God's plan for the salvation of the world, showing how individual freedom and God's sovereignty interact to shape human history. The book of Genesis shows that God is sovereign not only in creation but also in choosing God's people. When God chose Abraham and his descendants, God revealed that God's sovereignty encompasses God's choices and God's plans for the nation of Israel. Even though the Israelites had the freedom to choose whether to remain faithful to God or to rebel, God's sovereignty remained at work in guiding their history. Israel's election wasn't the result of anything humanity did, but rather God's decision to set them apart as God's people (Gen 17:7) *“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an*

*everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you”* This reminds humanity that God's sovereignty isn't limited to creation or judgment; it also extends to God's plan of salvation through God's chosen people.<sup>18</sup>

### **God's Sovereignty in the Exodus and Covenant with Israel**

The sovereignty of God in the story of humanity's salvation, especially in the Book of Exodus and God's covenant with Israel, is a key theme that unfolds through the important events in Exodus and the books that follow. The Exodus itself, when God freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, not only shows God's divine power but also reveals God's unyielding will to deliver God's people.<sup>19</sup> This isn't just a story about physical liberation, but about a freedom that only God could bring about. In the Exodus narrative, God is revealed as the sovereign Lord, guiding the course of human history to accomplish God's eternal plan.<sup>20</sup>

God chose to deliver Israel in an extraordinary way, revealing God's power through a series of miracles, from the ten

<sup>17</sup> Manurung and Hendriks, “Covenant and Salvation,” 6.

<sup>18</sup> Kosmartua Situmorang and Daulat Marulitua, “Kedaulatan Allah Dalam Misi-Nya,” *Jurnal Teologi Rahmat* 8, no. 1 (2022): 61-80.

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Bronson, “A Complete Chronology of the Israelites in Egypt: A Textual Study of the Length of the Sojourn from a Seventh-

Day Adventist Perspective,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research* 12, no. 1 (2020): 1-30.

<sup>20</sup> Roy Haries Ifraldo Tambun, “God Fights to Save the Nation of Israel: A Historical-Critical Review of Exodus 15:1-21,” *Theological Journal Kerugma* 7, no. 2 (October 4, 2024): 73-83.

plagues that struck Egypt to the parting of the Red Sea. Each of these events reflected God's authority over everything, both visible and invisible.<sup>21</sup> God's decision to free God's people wasn't based on human will, but on God's sovereign love and choice. When God declared, "I will be their God, and they will be my people," God established not just their physical freedom, but also an eternal, loving relationship with the people.

After delivering Israel from Egypt, God made a covenant with them at Mount Sinai. But this covenant wasn't just a simple agreement between two parties. It was God's sovereign will to choose Israel as His people and to fulfill God's decision to free God's people wasn't based on human will, but on God's sovereign love and choice. When God declared, "I will be their God, and they will be my people," God established not just their physical freedom, but also an eternal, loving relationship with them.

This covenant revealed a deeper relationship between God, the sovereign Lord, and God's chosen people. When God gave Israel God's laws, it wasn't to burden them but to offer them a way of life that

would bring them peace and well being.<sup>22</sup> Through this covenant, God made it clear that, even though Israel was God's chosen nation, they still needed to live in obedience to God. This shows that, even though God has ultimate authority over everything, God's relationship with God's people is rooted in unwavering love, faithfulness, and truth.

The Law that God gave to Israel through Moses is a clear reflection of God's sovereignty. It wasn't just a set of rules for moral or social behavior, but divine guidance designed to keep God's people close to God. Through these laws, God showed that God's people's lives should align with God's will. But the law also made the Israelites realize their own inability to fully live up to God's standards, highlighting their need for salvation through God's grace.<sup>23</sup> Grace that only the sovereign God could provide.

After making the covenant, God commanded the building of the Tabernacle as a place where God could meet with God's people. It was here that the Israelites could come to worship, showing that the sovereign God wanted a close, personal

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<sup>21</sup> Giechard Pelamonia, "Implikasi Penyelamatan Allah Atas Israel Berdasarkan 14: 1-31 Bagi Orang Percaya Pada Masa Kini," *Davar: Jurnal Teologi* 2, no. 2 (2021): 122-133.

<sup>22</sup> Bronson, "A Complete Chronology," 8-

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<sup>23</sup> Devanto Kurniawan Hinna Ndulla et al., "Relasi Hukum Taurat Dan Anugerah Dalam Perjanjian Lama," *ELEOS: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 4, no. 1 (2024): 57-69.

relationship with Israel.<sup>24</sup> God's presence among them was made visible by the cloud during the day and the fire at night, reminding them that God wasn't just ruling over the world God was always there with them. The Tabernacle became a symbol of God's holy presence, not just showing God's power, but also God's deep love for God's people.

The liberation of Israel from Egypt shows that God is the ruler over all nations, even the most powerful ones. Through this event, God demonstrated that God controls the course of human life, and God's will is always fulfilled, often in ways that could never have been imagined.<sup>25</sup> The covenant with Israel also carries the message that salvation is not just for Israel, but for anyone in the world who believes in God. As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah in (Isa 49:6), "*I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth*" demonstrating that the covenant with Israel was meant to extend to all nations, fulfilling God's sovereign will for humanity.

### **Human Free Will and Moral Responsibility in the Old Testament**

The Old Testament offers a rich and complex picture of human free will and moral responsibility, which are deeply connected to God's sovereignty. While God's authority and plan are evident throughout Scripture, humans are still portrayed as beings with the freedom to choose and the responsibility to face the consequences of their choices. The tension between God's absolute sovereignty and human free will plays a crucial role in how humans understand moral relationships in the Old Testament.<sup>26</sup> It shows that even though God is fully in control of everything, humans are still responsible for living according to God's law, and human choices have real consequences not just for themselves, but also for others.

This passage highlights how the Bible presents God's sovereignty and human free will not as opposing forces, but as integrated aspects of a unified divine-human relationship that shapes ethical living. Rather than being in conflict, God's sovereignty and human free will work together to shape the ethical principles that God's people are called to follow.

<sup>24</sup> Sabda Budiman et al., "Implikasi Kronologi Bangsa Israel Keluar Dari Mesir Dalam Kitab Keluaran Bagi Orang Percaya," *Shema: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 1, no. 1 (2021): 1–18.

<sup>25</sup> Susila and Risvan, "Reconstructing the

Formation," 123-124.

<sup>26</sup> Aldorio Flavius Lele, "Kedaulatan Allah Atas Kehidupan Manusia: Kajian Narasi Kitab Ayub 42:7-17," *Jurnal Ilmu Teologi dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen* 3, no. 2 (2022): 104–132.

The wisdom literature in the Old Testament, particularly in Proverbs, reinforces the idea of human moral responsibility. In (Prov 1:29–31), humans are warned that those who reject wisdom will experience the consequences of their choices: “*Because they hated knowledge and did not choose the fear of the Lord, would have none of my counsel, and despised all my reproof, therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way and be sated with their own devices.*” This verse shows how human free will comes into play in the decision to accept or reject God's will.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, there is a direct connection between moral responsibility and the consequences of the choices people make, highlighting that human actions have unavoidable outcomes.

The Old Testament presents the Torah—comprising Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—as the body of divine instruction given to Israel through Moses. Far beyond a mere legal code for societal regulation, the Torah functions as a formative guide for cultivating ethical living and faithful

devotion in the covenantal relationship between God and the community.<sup>28</sup> The Torah served as a guide for God's people to live in a way that reflected obedience to the Lord.

One of the key highlights of the Torah is its focus on justice and moral responsibility in human relationships. For example, in (Exod 21:22–23), there are laws that regulate different aspects of daily life, such as protecting women and children, and how to treat foreigners and those who are vulnerable.<sup>29</sup> The laws underscore the principle that individuals are morally accountable for their actions and are expected to uphold justice in their conduct. A striking illustration of this is found in (Exod 21:12), which states, “*Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death.*” This provision affirms that the taking of a human life constitutes not only a grave injustice against the victim but also a profound violation of divine order.<sup>30</sup> Because of this, there is a great moral responsibility for each individual to protect the lives of others and live according to the principles of justice set by God.

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<sup>27</sup> Stephen Coleman, ““Hear, My Son and Dwell Secure!” A Rhetorical Analysis Of Proverbs 1:8–33,” *Verbum Christi: Jurnal Teologi Reformed Injili* 10, no. 2 (2023): 133–148.

<sup>28</sup> Gary Edward Schnittjer, *Torah Story: An Apprenticeship on the Pentateuch*, II. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 21–24.

<sup>29</sup> Adriano Da Silva Carvalho, “The Bible and Abortion: Exodus 21:22–23 in the Septuagint and Other Opinions,” *International Journal of Philosophy* 11, no. 1 (2023): 6–10.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2021), 405.

Within the Old Testament framework, the Law functions as a divine disclosure of God's intentions, guiding His people toward righteous and just living. A key illustration of this is found in (Deut 6:4-5), where it is declared that "*The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.*" This central command underscores that the ethical duties of Israel are not limited to social relations but fundamentally rooted in an all-encompassing commitment to God, demonstrated through faithful observance of God's commandments.<sup>31</sup> The Law also helps maintain holiness before God. In (Lev 19:2), God says, "*Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy.*" Living according to God's laws is how God's people express their loyalty and honor to God. The moral responsibility becomes even clearer: every action they take should reflect God's holiness and justice.

Besides regulating the rights and responsibilities between individuals, the Law of Moses also seeks to protect God's people from injustice. In (Lev 25:23), God reminds the Israelites "*The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with me.*"

This shows that God has the right to decide how God's people should live, and God's laws protect each individual, ensuring they aren't taken advantage of by those who are stronger or in positions of power.<sup>32</sup>

Moral responsibility in the Old Testament also involves the concept of forgiveness. Even though God's laws were strict, God still offered a chance for repentance to those who had fallen into sin. One clear example of this is found in Leviticus 16, where the Day of Atonement became a crucial moment for the people of Israel to receive forgiveness for their sins.<sup>33</sup> This shows that moral responsibility isn't just about following the law, but also about being willing to repent and ask God for forgiveness.

Moral responsibility within the framework of God's law in the Old Testament transcends mere compliance with divine commandments; it also involves the active pursuit of justice, the demonstration of love, and the cultivation of respect for others. Individuals are held accountable for their decisions, even as humans exercise their free will.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Labahn, *The Oxford Handbook of Deuteronomy*, ed. Don C Benjamin (New York: Oxford University Press, 2025), 284–287.

<sup>32</sup> Simon J. Joseph, "'The Land Is Mine' (Leviticus 25:23): Reimagining the Jubilee in the

Context of the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 50, no. 4 (2020): 180–190.

<sup>33</sup> Yaw Adu and Gyamfi, "A Literary and Ritual Analysis of Leviticus 16," *Scriptura* 122, no. 1 (2023): 1–21.

### **Theological Relevance of God's Sovereignty and Human Freedom in Contemporary Theology**

The theological insights derived from the Old Testament reveal a nuanced model of interaction between divine sovereignty and human freedom. This model avoids the binary opposition often found in contemporary theological debates, particularly those shaped by strict deterministic or libertarian paradigms. Instead, the Old Testament presents a framework in which both divine authority and human moral agency operate concurrently within the context of covenantal history and ethical responsibility.<sup>34</sup>

In numerous Old Testament narratives, the interaction between God's sovereign will and human decision-making is portrayed not as a contradiction, but as a dynamic collaboration. The accounts of Abraham's obedient journey, the Israelites' covenantal obligations, and the cyclical disobedience in the era of the Judges illustrate a pattern wherein human choices unfold meaningfully within the boundaries of divine providence. The structure of these narratives demonstrates that moral agency

functions effectively even when divine purposes remain supreme.

Ancient Israelite theology, as reflected in the Torah and prophetic literature, identifies moral responsibility as intrinsic to the identity of the covenant people. Freedom is portrayed not as unrestricted autonomy, but as a capacity to respond faithfully to divine commands. This understanding shaped Israel's collective self-awareness as a chosen people who were expected to embody justice, holiness, and loyalty under divine guidance. The legal codes and prophetic calls to repentance reinforce the expectation that each decision carries ethical weight, and that disobedience disrupts—not nullifies—the divine-human relationship.<sup>35</sup> Within the broader narrative of salvation in the Old Testament, human freedom plays a vital role in the unfolding of divine promises. The repeated patterns of sin, judgment, repentance, and restoration reveal that genuine choice exists, even as the ultimate direction of salvation history remains under divine control. Human actions serve as real instruments through which divine intentions are realized. This theological structure affirms that

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<sup>34</sup> Ulrich H.J. Körtner, "The Human Being and the World as God's Creation: Present-Day Ethical Conflicts and Consequences of the Doctrine of Creation in the Perspective of the Doctrine of Justification," *HTS Theologese Studies / Theological*

*Studies* 77, no. 3 (July 1, 2021): 1–9.

<sup>35</sup> Phaswane S. Makuwa, "The Authority of God Takes Precedence over Scripture and Tradition," *In die Skriflig / In Luce Verbi* 58, no. 1 (March 7, 2024): 1–9.

redemptive history involves both the initiative of divine grace and the reality of human response.

In the context of contemporary theology, these findings offer a valuable corrective to polarized frameworks. Traditions emphasizing predestination often risk diminishing moral accountability, while views that exalt free will may inadvertently weaken the sovereignty of God. The Old Testament provides a mediating vision: divine authority encompasses and empowers human freedom without being threatened by it. Rather than forcing a resolution through philosophical abstraction, Old Testament theology grounds this relationship in narrative, covenant, and lived experience.<sup>36</sup>

This paradigm holds significant implications for current theological reflection. In soteriology, it encourages a perspective in which salvation is both a sovereign act and an invitation to faithful response. In ethics, it supports the notion that moral responsibility is not undermined by divine foreknowledge or control. In missiology, it underscores the role of human participation in divine mission as a meaningful expression of covenant partnership.

This paradigm holds significant implications for current theological reflection. In soteriology, it encourages a perspective in which salvation is both a sovereign act and an invitation to faithful response. In ethics, it supports the notion that moral responsibility is not undermined by divine foreknowledge or control. In missiology, it underscores the role of human participation in divine mission as a meaningful expression of covenant partnership. Ultimately, the Old Testament contributes a theological model in which divine sovereignty and human freedom are harmonized within the drama of history and covenant. This model promotes a vision of theological integration—one that honors divine supremacy while affirming the dignity and responsibility of human agency in the unfolding of redemptive history.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study, through a historical-critical and biblical-theological approach, has demonstrated that in the Old Testament, God's sovereignty and human freedom are not opposing forces but complementary elements within the framework of the divine covenant. The narratives affirm God's absolute authority over creation and history, while simultaneously portraying human beings as moral agents responsible

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<sup>36</sup> Isaac Boaheng, "Divine Sovereignty,"

for their decisions and actions. The interaction between divine sovereignty and human freedom plays a fundamental role in shaping the identity of Israel as God's chosen people—called to respond to God's covenantal love with obedience and faithfulness.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that human freedom, though genuine and meaningful, is always situated within the overarching purposes of God's sovereign plan. Human decisions, whether faithful or rebellious, ultimately serve—not disrupt—the fulfillment of God's redemptive work in history.

Therefore, the Old Testament presents a theological model in which divine sovereignty and human agency coexist dynamically without contradiction. This model offers significant insights for contemporary theological discourse, encouraging a vision of human freedom that is both accountable and meaningful under the sovereign reign of God. A proper understanding of this relationship promotes moral responsibility grounded in trust toward divine providence within the unfolding of salvation history

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