Summary

Christian theologians and philosophers have a long history of attempting to reconcile the perceived tension between the doctrine of God’s foreknowledge on the one hand and human free will and responsibility on the other. Throughout the centuries various solutions have been proposed as to how to retain both concepts in a coherent way. One of these solutions focuses on the concept of middle knowledge: apart from “natural knowledge” of necessary truths and “free knowledge” of God’s own actions, God also knows counterfactuals of creaturely freedom. That is, God knows what any human being would freely do given a set of conditions x, y and z. God can then manage the conditions that apply in such a way that God’s providential plans are realized without human (libertarian) freedom being compromised. This theory originates with the Spanish Jesuit Luis de Molina (1535-1600), was contested by Reformed theologians such as Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), and makes a remarkable comeback among present-day analytical philosophers such as William Lane Craig (1949-).

Apart from a wealth of philosophical considerations, the appeal to biblical texts also plays an important role in the work on middle knowledge by each of these thinkers. For example, Molina appeals to Ps. 139:3-4, Isa. 41:23, 48:5, Jn. 14:29 and Heb. 4:13 to support his understanding of divine foreknowledge of future contingents, and argues that 1 Sam. 23:6-13 and Matt. 11:20-24 are direct Scriptural indications of middle knowledge. Moreover, one of the most active advocates of middle knowledge today, William Lane Craig, also points to 1 Sam. 23:6-13 and Matt. 11:20-24 as important Scriptural evidence of this theory. However, whereas the theory’s philosophical ramifications have been widely discussed in contemporary scholarly literature during the past decades, surprisingly little attention has been given to its use of biblical texts. This research aims at filling this gap, by critically examining the attempts to defend or criticize the theory of middle knowledge with reference to the Bible. Considering that in the course of the discussion, Molina, Bavinck, and Craig have made influential contributions to the discussions on middle knowledge, in three separate chapters the writings of Molina, Bavinck and Craig on the topic of middle knowledge are carefully examined with special attention given to the role of the Bible in their arguments. I also investigated how the biblical texts which play a role in these authors’ defense or refutation of middle knowledge are interpreted in the work of contemporary biblical scholars, or how these should be interpreted from their methodical perspectives.

In the chapter on Molina, I introduce the theory of middle knowledge within its historical and theological context. I show from the broader theological context at Molina’s time that post-Tridentine Roman Catholic theology was largely shaped by Thomas Aquinas as appropriated in contemporary Thomism and that as a result of its close engagement with scholastic theology, philosophy was viewed as a valid and legitimate way of formulating theological arguments and interpreting Scripture. In this light, proving the possibility of the logical reconciliation of foreknowledge and freedom through metaphysics played a decisive role in Molina’s argument. I show that although Molina did attempt to include Scriptural reflection in the process of formulating his theory of middle knowledge, the way in which he uses the Scriptures reveals that most likely he did not make biblical interpretation a significant part of his arguments. Rather, his appeals to Scripture seem intended to support his pre-conceived philosophical conclusions. I then examine Ps. 139:3-5; Isa. 41:23 and 48:5; Jn. 14:29 and Heb. 4:13. I argue in a provisional way that these texts do not speak about God’s foreknowledge as Molina defines the concept (i.e. in terms of pre-volitional knowledge of future contingents); and although 1 Sam. 23:10-12 and Matt.11:20-24 indicate God’s
knowledge of what would have happened had another possibility obtained, this does not prove that God foreknows conditional contingents in the way in which Molina conceives of this (i.e. that God obtains middle knowledge).

In my discussion of Molina’s theory of middle knowledge, I point out that for Molina’s theory to function the existence of foreknown conditions lying outside God’s will is required. This became a critical reason that not only middle knowledge was fiercely condemned by the Dominicans in the 16th century; it was rejected by a large number of other Thomists, Protestants, and the Reformed theologians as well. Middle knowledge was problematic to these groups because by intentionally placing it between God’s natural and free knowledge, middle knowledge does not merely understand God as having willed a particular world or preferring a particular world over another, but discerns a kind of divine cognition arising from future contingencies _prior_ to or _apart_ from God’s will. In order for God to have this kind of cognition, God would have to be ignorant of His determination and decision, which interferes with the theological belief that there can be nothing that falls outside the scope of God’s will. As a result, middle knowledge seemed to them to destroy the lordship of God—by sacrificing the sovereignty of God, it alters the relationship between God and finite creatures.

In the chapter on Bavinck, I point out that by holding to Scripture as theology’s _principium cognoscendi_, the Reformed application of logic in the understanding of God’s knowledge is bound by exegesis of Scriptural texts. Middle knowledge was rejected by the Reformed as its theological conclusion does not seem to accord with the biblical _principium_ as a whole. Bavinck further develops the Reformed terminology of _principium_, and applies it in explaining the organic nature of Scripture and its organic relation with theology. This provides a strong argument of Bavinck that theology must begin with Scripture, proceed from faith, and be articulated by its own _principia_. I showed that this perspective becomes the groundwork of Bavinck’s positive theological formulations (e.g., on divine knowing) and his polemical arguments (e.g., against middle knowledge). Based on this ground, Bavinck strongly argued that middle knowledge is to be repudiated because it aims at something different from the Scriptural teaching of God’s essence and His relationship with His creatures. It brings the notion of the freedom of the will—in the sense of liberty of indifference—into harmony with God’s omniscience. In terms of the role of the Bible in Bavinck’s arguments, as shown above, Bavinck wants to start unilaterally from Scripture. Nevertheless, his articulation and usage of theological terms such as _principium_ indicates the philosophical epistemologies he derived from Augustine and Aristotle. His understanding of Scriptural texts is influenced by these philosophical backgrounds to such an extent that at times he seems to be approaching theology from a philosophical perspective. We may ask, therefore, whether Bavinck indeed worked as unilaterally from Scripture to theological and philosophical reflection as he claims, or whether in fact there is a two-traffic going on here.

Then I move to the chapter on Craig. I study Craig’s view on the difference between logical and temporal order, which serves as the key foundation for his explanation of the logical order between foreknowledge and freedom: divine foreknowledge is _chronologically_ prior to future events, whereas future events are _logically_ prior to divine foreknowledge. By applying this metaphysical principle of “logical order,” Craig argues that human agents have causal effects on the future and determine which course of events will be actualized, while God’s foreknowledge does not detract from this. From this point, Craig affirms that libertarian freedom can be attributed to human agents within a framework that also places everything within God’s control and decision, with the condition that God has knowledge of
future events that are free (i.e. middle knowledge). This leads me to study Craig’s version of middle knowledge (which is similar to Molina’s) more closely, and to survey the theoretical and practical objections raised against (this version of) middle knowledge in contemporary debates.

I then turn to investigate Craig’s biblical account of God’s comprehensive knowledge, and the biblical references he uses to support the theory of middle knowledge. My investigation shows that the biblical delineation of God’s knowledge plays a crucial role especially in Craig’s affirmation of God’s comprehensive knowledge, and he strives to defend God’s comprehensive knowledge of the past, present, and future. Nevertheless, although Craig examines divine foreknowledge on Scriptural grounds and defends it as biblical, he switches to an analytical examination when dealing with its relationship to human freedom. The obligatory and primary role of logical consistency is shown in the way Craig formulates his argument (e.g. the application of “logical order” in showing the compatibility of foreknowledge and freedom, and in affirming the possibility of middle knowledge). Lastly, I evaluate the biblical and theological grounds of Craig’s (and his peers’) arguments, and conclude that the theological notion of foreknowledge more adequately accords with the overall biblical account of God than the philosophical elaborations such as middle knowledge.

The last two chapters are aimed at providing the guidelines that lead to the intended purpose and goal of discovering a more definitive ground for the systematic-theological evaluation of, and reflection on, the Scriptural texts cited by Molina, Bavinck, and Craig. To work toward this constructive goal, I concentrate on the works of Brevard S. Childs (OT) and Anthony C. Thiselton (NT). I study the orientation of Childs’ conception of “canonical approach” and Thiselton’s hermeneutical approach which emphasizes the fusion of “two horizons.” Attention is given to the church’s exegetical tradition or the “family resemblance” of exegesis laid out by Childs, as it provides boundaries beyond which biblical interpretation as a whole forbids us to go. Thiselton’s insistence on the active engagement of the horizon of the reader and the horizon of the text is an especially crucial point and one of the reasons why this study focuses on investigating and evaluating the biblical texts Molina, Bavinck, and Craig cited to support their respective views. Taking into account the observations deriving from my findings of how Childs and Thiselton approach the Bible, I proposed the following framework for a possible theological appropriation of the Bible—the conditions or lenses through which we can study and interpret the Bible theologically: (1) The Beginning and Ending of the Knowledge of God: The Bible; (2) Encountering the Living God: The Lordship of the Triune God; (3) Working towards a Coherent Biblical Vision of God: Creedal Context; (4) Relating Scripture and Theology: The Larger Context of Bible and Its Method; (5) Responding with Obedience: Faith Seeking Understanding.

I then propose a theological reading and interpretation of Ps. 139:3-5, Isa. 41:23 and 48:5, Heb. 4:13; Jn. 14:29; 1 Sam. 23:6-13 and Matt. 11:20-24 with the aforesaid parameters as an overarching framework, along with the results of examinations in the precious chapters. My investigation shows that the theological scope of Ps. 139:3-5; Isa. 41:23 and 48:5; Heb. 4:13; as well Jn. 14:29 is theocentric; it is about the absolute mightiness of God—His divine sovereignty, power, and deliverance. In line with this, I argue that the indication of God’s knowledge and will in these texts are associated with God’s presence and ability, His saving grace and act, and His covenant with those who acknowledge Him as saviour. In other words, God’s knowledge or foreknowledge in these texts points to God’s benevolent power and action, rather than to how much God knows. Therefore, it is legitimate to conclude that these
texts do not construe foreknowledge specifically as sets of conditions foreknown by God prior to His divine willing (which is how Molina and Craig understand them). As about 1 Sam. 23:6-13 and Matt. 11:20-24, it is difficult to derive biblical evidence of middle knowledge from God’s awareness of conditional contingents indicated in these passages, especially when these two passages say nothing about human freedom or the relation between God’s knowledge and human freedom. If so, we can rightly conclude from our biblical-theological investigations that middle knowledge does not stand on firm biblical ground. Furthermore, to accept the Molinists’ account of God’s knowledge and their metaphysical definition of freedom leads to sacrificing and downplaying the overall biblical-theological account of God—the sovereign and saving God who creates, redeems, and consummates His creation.

In considering the proposed framework that is sketched in light of Childs and Thiselton’s approaches, we see that the priority of the Bible is certainly a significant characteristic of contemporary biblical-theological scholarship. It is legitimate to conclude that in the views of contemporary biblical scholars and theologians, a scientific and hermeneutically sensitive approach requires a firm commitment to the object under investigation. If we are to understand God’s knowledge and its relation to freedom, we must turn to the texts of Scripture themselves, not as finding support for the intention or view we concluded from other fields or disciplines, but as the starting and ending point of our quest and answer. Admittedly, turning to the Scriptures as the beginning and end of the study of foreknowledge-freedom is largely ignored in most contemporary studies of this topic. We recognize from our study of Molina, Bavinck, and Craig, however, that the foreknowledge-freedom tension cannot be rationally solved by exclusively philosophical approaches.

In my view, recognizing this limitation has an important implication for contemporary debates on middle knowledge: what is called for is a major broadening of the horizon in studying the foreknowledge-freedom tension. On the one hand, in a context where philosophical considerations are imposed upon Scriptural texts in order to harmonize foreknowledge and freedom, our horizon is widened by the recognition that we are not to adopt too easily the “solutions” in which foreknowledge and freedom are assumed to be incompatible, or shy away from Scriptural texts that do not fit in to our “system.” On the other hand, we are also to acknowledge the need of exploring a framework that investigates the foreknowledge-freedom tension theologically and exegetically, including careful reflections upon biblical passages that are sometimes seen as irrational or incoherent in terms of foreknowledge and freedom. There is a need to reverse the contemporary pattern of inquiry regarding middle knowledge, endeavouring not to fit God into our story, but entering into His narrative to know Him and our position before Him. We need to turn to the Scriptures, to explore a framework where we can learn to know who God is and His ways with humankind. As it is demonstrated in this research, interpreting those Scriptural texts within the proposed parameters redirects our focus of how they are often understood.