

He Is Sovereign over His Own Sovereignty: An Introduction to God's Openness

A Proposal of Possibilities with God¹

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The Heat of Battle

Fierce, hot, and soberingly serious accusations continue to be brought forth from the Calvinistic evangelical traditionalist. Charges of “heresy,”² “heretic,” and “unchristian”³ are being spewed forth with seemingly little reservation. These weighty pronouncements are not being fired at Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses or even Roman Catholics, but at Baptists, Lutherans and other professing Christians across denominational lines. A unique group of evangelical scholars and writers is taking hard blows for critiquing the concepts of Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Philo, and their successors, the early church fathers.⁴

¹ This investigative paper was presented at the 12th annual Theological Conference, Atlanta Bible College, Morrow, Georgia, 7 February 2003.

² R.C. Sproul, Jr. reviews *Bound Only Once: The Failure of Open Theism* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001), D. Wilson, ed., noting that “this is not merely a bad option, but that it is damnable heresy” at “Strange Dreams,”

<http://www.gospelcom.net/hsc/ETC/Volume_Five/Issue_Six/Reviews.php>. Sproul Jr. also imprecates openness theologians, noting that “we can pray that [God] would destroy the idolatrous works of iniquity and the workers thereof,” as cited in John Sanders, “On Heffalumps and Heresies: Responses to Accusations Against Open Theism,” <http://journalofbiblicalstudies.org/Issue5/Heffalumps_and_Heresies.doc>. Accessed March 16, 2003.

³ R.C. Sproul, Sr. and John Piper, in a taped discussion, regard the open view of God as pagan, anti-Christian, and blasphemous. Sproul says, “Clark Pinnock is not a believer — I would not have fellowship with him.” See C. Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2001, 16. Sproul also writes, “This fascination with the openness of God is an assault, not merely on Calvinism, or even on classical theism, but on Christianity itself.” See Sproul, *Willing to Believe: The Controversy over Free Will*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997, 143; Pinnock gave the following footnote response, “As I have sought a reason why such critics can be so unkind and unfair, I have wondered if theologians do not tend to become the picture of God that they espouse” (*Most Moved Mover*), 17.

⁴ See Pinnock and others, *The Openness of God*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994, ch. 2; Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, ch. 2; and John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998, ch. 5.

Concepts such as the exhaustive future foreknowledge of God, impassibility (God does not have passions, or emotions), immutability (God does not change in any respect), and divine timelessness are being seriously questioned by these evangelical thinkers. “The God of the gospel is not the god of philosophy,” says Clark Pinnock.⁵ Proponents of what has come to be called “Open Theism” are firmly rejecting these Greek philosophical notions that destroy the living, active and personal God of Scripture. By appealing to the *prima facie*, simple, clear and straightforward meaning of many overlooked passages and metaphors used in Scripture, the loving, moving, responsive, changing, active, relational, personal, and passionate God of the Hebrew Bible is reemerging. We will examine these four interrelated Greek attributes and see how Scripture is better understood without superimposing them onto the historical record.

Pagan Infiltration

“Jesus spoke Aramaic, not Greek, and the Bible was written in Jerusalem, not Athens. The Christian doctrine of God was, however, shaped in an atmosphere influenced by Greek thought.”⁶ Plato argued in the *Republic* that deity, being perfect, cannot change or be changed because any change in a “perfect” being could only be for the worse. If the deity changes, then he is either not perfect at present, or he was previously not perfect before the change.⁷ From this understanding it was deduced that God therefore does not change in any respect. God’s knowledge, thoughts, will, and emotions are therefore unchanging and fixed. This idea has had a profound influence upon Christian thinkers throughout the ages and continues even to this day.⁸

Classical/Traditional View of Omniscience

Wayne Grudem, a popular systematic theologian, echoes this way of thinking by defining omniscience: “God fully knows Himself and all things actual and possible in *one simple and eternal act*.”⁹ If it is unclear what is meant by “one simple and eternal act,” Grudem defines his own terms: “This means that *God’s knowledge never changes or grows*. If He were ever to learn something new, He would not have been omniscient beforehand. Thus, from all eternity God has known all things that *would happen* and all things that He would do.”¹⁰

⁵ Pinnock, *The Most Moved Mover*, 27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁷ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 174.

⁸ See Pinnock and others, *The Openness of God*, ch. 2.; Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, ch. 2; and Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, ch. 5.

⁹ See W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994, 190-193, emphasis added.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 191, emphasis added.

The Open View

It goes without saying that God is omniscient, that is God knows all things.¹¹ “Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13).

The question:

is not over whether or not God perfectly knows all of reality: But what is the reality, which God perfectly knows. The “Open” View holds that the future *now* is partly composed of indefinite possibilities as opposed to the view that it is exclusively composed of definite realities. It is in part constituted as a “*maybe* this or *maybe* that,” not exclusively as “*certainly* this and *certainly not* that.”¹²

Pinnock boldly says, “The idea that God knows every detail of the future is not taught in Scripture and is philosophically questionable.”¹³

Testing Abraham: “Now I know”

The well-known account of Abraham is a case in point. Did God know beforehand that Abraham would trust Him to the point of offering the promised child (Isaac) as a sacrifice? If God knew ahead of time, would this not render the “test” fake, unauthentic and strange (Gen. 22:1)? Walter Brueggemann plainly states that this “is not a game with God; God genuinely does not know...The flow of the narrative accomplishes something in the awareness of God. He did not know. Now He knows.”¹⁴ Was it not when “Abraham reached out his hand, took the knife, and prepared to slaughter his son” that God Himself said, “Do not harm the boy!...Do not do anything to him, for *now I know* that you fear God, *because* you did not withhold your son, your only son, from me” (Gen. 22:10, 12)? Commentators often have passed over this text in silence, or rendered it a mere anthropomorphism. Some have even said that the test was for Abraham’s benefit rather than God’s.

It should be brought to our attention though that the only one in the text who is said to learn anything from the test is *God*.¹⁵ “If one presupposes that God already ‘knew’ the results of the test beforehand, then the text is at least worded poorly and at most simply false.”¹⁶ The text makes most sense when we allow it to speak for itself. God was testing Abraham in order to see if he was the sort of

¹¹ See 1 Chr. 28:9; Job 24:23; 31:4; 34:21; Ps. 119:168; 139:23-24; 147:4; Isa. 40:26; Jer. 16:17; 17:9-10; Matt. 10; 29-30; Luke 16:15; Acts 1:24; Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 4:5; 1 John 3:19-20.

¹² Boyd, *The “Open” View of the Future*, http://www.opentheism.org/open_view_of_future_boyd.htm.

¹³ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 100.

¹⁴ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

person He could count on and collaborate with toward the fulfillment of His divine restorative purpose (Gen. 12:3). The question is, “Will Abraham be faithful?” Or must God find someone else through whom to achieve His purpose? God wanted Abraham’s obedience in order to bring about the promises (Gen. 18:19). It is only *after* the test that renews and ratifies the earlier conditional promise to give Abraham what was lost in Eden, that is (1) a *land* flowing with milk and honey (*garden* of Eden), (2) a great *nation* without number (“be fruitful and multiply”), (3) *kingship* (“subdue it and *rule*,” Gen. 1:28; cf. Gen. 22:15-18).¹⁷

Other Divine Examinations

This passage of divine testing in which God seeks to *find out* what will take place in a new set of circumstances is not unique in scriptural testimony. There are others including the “test” of Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 32:31 in which “God left him alone to test him, in order *to know* what was in his heart.”¹⁸ In various places, the Hebrew Bible also speaks of God testing His corporate people.¹⁹

The most famous of these accounts may be God testing the Israelites in the dry, hot, barren wilderness. Deuteronomy 8:2 explicitly says, “You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, *to know* what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not.” In another instance, prophets who attempted to lead Israel astray from the one and only true God were used as a gauge by which God could see and know who was truly committed and loyal to Him. “God is testing you *to find out* if you love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut. 13:1-3). “What kind of dialog is it where one party already knows what the other will say or do?”²⁰ Each of these accounts clearly calls into question the theory that God never comes to know anything, and that His knowledge is unchanging. Certainly God is *uncertain* whether or not His people will remain faithful to Him in these tests. Gripping onto the notion that God’s future knowledge is entirely exhaustive can actually be a hindrance to allowing revelation to reveal what God knows about the future and thus what is knowable. The sense of these passages gives the honest reader the general impression that God is testing His people to *find out* how they will react under new or different circumstances.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, *The New English Translation Bible*, Dallas: Biblical Studies Press, 2001, Genesis 12, study note 12, translator note 14, study note 22, translator note 23.

¹⁸ Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible: Does God Ever Change His Mind?* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000, 64.

¹⁹ See Exod. 16:4; Jdg. 2:22; 3:4.

²⁰ *The Openness of God*, 122.

Anthropomorphisms and Language

Many commentators understand the previous texts as anthropomorphisms. By this they attempt to be good interpreters and not relegate to God attributes and qualities that are not truly His. When Scripture speaks of trees clapping,²¹ or God's people taking cover under His wings,²² we must be careful to distinguish between a crassly wooden literalism, and the metaphors that the authors of Scripture used as literary devices to communicate something true. In the former example, God's creation is seen as rejoicing and celebrating as a rhetorical strategy to show the magnitude of happiness and greatness of the event. The latter example speaks of the comfort and security we, His people, can find in God, just as a chick finds shelter and warmth under its mother's wings. The line between literal and figurative though can be difficult to distinguish at times, especially when Scripture speaks of God having human parts and characteristics. Since human beings are made in the image and likeness of God, much speculation has taken place on this point. In a broad sense, all language about God is *human language* and thus anthropomorphic. Some have even claimed that "all human language for God is improper, since it brings God down to our level and imposes human concepts and language on God."²³ The underlying presupposition to this position is that "God is ontologically and epistemologically wholly beyond us."²⁴ In this manner, theologians commonly claim that "biblical anthropomorphisms are 'accommodations' on God's part to our limited abilities to understand."²⁵ The greatly loved and hated John Calvin commented on Genesis 6:6:

"And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and His heart was filled with pain." Since we cannot comprehend [God] as He is, it is necessary that, for our sake, He should, in a certain sense, transform Himself [by using figures of speech about Himself]...Certainly God is not sorrowful or sad; but remains forever like Himself in His celestial and happy repose: yet because it could not otherwise be known how great God's hatred and detestation of sin, therefore the Spirit accommodates Himself to our capacity...God was so offended by the atrocious wickedness of men, [He speaks] *as if* they had wounded His heart with mortal grief.²⁶

²¹ See Isa. 55:12.

²² See Ps. 17:8; 91:4. This type of language is specifically *zoomorphism*, ascribing animal characteristics to God.

²³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 20.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁶ J. Eareckson Tada and Steve Estes, *When God Weeps*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997, 242-243.

How do such theologians know for sure what God ultimately is like? “Have they found the God beyond God?”²⁷ The question is, “Was God sorrowful or not?” Is this text in Genesis genuinely depicting reality? Does it truly describe the inner life of God? Or, as Calvin and others say, are these verses merely an accommodation to our finite humanness by the spirit of God? Let us suppose for a moment that God wanted to tell us He really *does* regret certain decisions He has made and really *does* experience unexpected disappointment. How could God do so in clearer terms? It is truly difficult to conceive how God could be more forthright.²⁸ We suggest that those who wrote Scripture possessed a very different presupposition than those who relegate God into an ineffable state of being, beyond us, wholly other, and incomprehensible.²⁹ Following a similar observation made by Abraham Joshua Heschel,³⁰ it can be argued that God changing His mind, expressing emotion and even relating to the future as possibilities is not anthropomorphism. Rather, our ability to change our minds, respond to changing circumstances, express emotions and experience the future as potentialities is theomorphism. In this scenario, God is not necessarily like us,³¹ but we are more like God than previously thought (Gen. 1:26). Therefore, we now are able to read that God wants to “find out” if we will remain faithful to Him and believe that the meaning is as it appears. God seeks to know if His people trust in Him, regardless of circumstances, by testing His people’s commitment to Him.

The Future as Open to God

Thinking that the future is partly open and unsettled — even to God — can be new to some, and shocking and unnerving to others, even though we experience our own lives as open and unsettled. Because this is a new proposition to many people, a review of key biblical texts is useful.

Never Entering God’s Mind

Several passages explicitly say that the wicked actions of man in general, and Israel specifically, reached a level of evil that God never imagined would happen. In other words, God *did not know* that humans would behave in such a grotesque

²⁷ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 33.

²⁸ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 86.

²⁹ They believed God was continually and progressively revealing Himself, making Himself known to man.

³⁰ Heschel argues that God’s concern for justice and love is not an anthropomorphism; rather, our concern for justice and love is a theomorphism! See the argument in Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 21.

³¹ On a close examination of those texts which speak of God being unlike us, one will notice that they usually speak of God as being forgiving whereas humans typically hold grudges (Isa. 55:8; Hos. 11:8-9).

manner to the extent that they did! Concerning Israel sacrificing their children to idols, God says, “nor did it *enter my mind* that they should do this abomination” (Jer. 32:35, NRSV). “Indeed *it never even entered my mind*” (Jer. 7:31; 19:5).

Expecting a Different Outcome

Other times, God is utterly shocked and surprised by how things turn out, for God *expected* a dramatically different outcome than what takes place. In the fifth chapter of Isaiah, the prophet uses a metaphor to describe God’s relationship to Israel by comparing God to a vinedresser who possessed a fertile hill, built a hedge of protection around it, planted a vine, built a watchtower in the middle of it, constructed a winepress and “*expected* it to produce good grapes, but it produced only worthless ones” (Isa. 5:1, 2, NASB). In the middle of the metaphoric narrative, God Himself breaks into the scene to ask some penetrating questions. “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done to it? Why, when I *expected* it to produce good grapes did it produce worthless ones?” (v. 4). The clear implication of this text is that God truly, honestly, and sincerely expected, anticipated, and looked forward to Israel blossoming with justice, mercy, and righteousness. “He *looked for* justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, a cry of distress” (v. 7). Had God known beforehand that Israel would become so wicked, either through His planning the event unilaterally, or by His own foreknowledge of history, how could God genuinely “expect” any outcome other than the one He *knew* would certainly, undoubtedly, and unquestionably come about? If God possessed exhaustive foreknowledge would *we* not “expect” God to “expect” correctly every time?

“I Thought...but...”

Although *we* may tend to be passive and timid in speaking of God experiencing the future as open, *God* is not. He unashamedly shares with the Jewish *nabi* (prophet) Jeremiah His *anticipatory forecast* that wayward Israel would return to Him after they had their fill of idolatry and false worship:

Jeremiah, you have no doubt seen what wayward Israel did. You have seen how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree and gave herself like a prostitute to other gods. Yet even after she had done all that, *I thought* that she would come back to me. But she did not (Jer. 3:6, 7, NET; cf. JPS).

Only a few verses later God exclaims:

I thought to myself, “Oh what a joy it would be for me to treat you like a son! What a joy it would be for me to give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful piece of property there is in all the world!” *I thought* that you would call me, “Father” and would not stop being loyal to me. But, you have been unfaithful to me, nation of Israel, like an unfaithful wife who has left her husband, says the LORD (Jer. 3:19, 20, NET; cf. JPS).

Once again we are compelled to ask the question whether these texts speak to reality or not. If God had foreordained all that shall come to pass,³² or even merely knew beforehand through His perfect foreknowledge that Israel would not return to Him, at that point in time, then why would God have hoped, imagined, or even begun to think that some other outcome *may* have come about? Why speak of possibilities when there are only certainties? It would be utterly impossible to imagine that God would have “thought” Israel might have returned and repented at that season, if God unequivocally *knew* otherwise.

A Truthful Dialogue with Moses

Scattered throughout the canon, God speaks of what “might”³³ or “might not” occur, also speaking of “maybes”³⁴ and “ifs.”³⁵ God’s call of Moses to tell Israel’s elders that God had appeared to Moses and sent him to deliver them from the Egyptian yoke illustrates this. God tells Moses in the clearest terms that “the elders will listen to you” (Exod. 3:18). Moses, seemingly unaware that the future is exhaustively known by God and thus settled, retorts, “And if they do not believe me or pay attention to me, but say, ‘The LORD has not appeared to you?’” (4:1). God, apparently unaware of the necessity to know everything in advance, demonstrates a sign for Moses that he could use to convince the elders (4:2-5).

Moses remains unconvinced; therefore God performs another sign, saying, “And *if* they do not believe you or pay attention to the former sign, then they *may* believe the latter sign” (Exod. 4:8). Isn’t the future response of Israel’s elders foreseen by God? Would somebody please tell God that He is supposed to know these things! God continues, “And *if* they do not believe even these two signs or listen to you, then take some water from the Nile and pour it out on the dry ground. The water that you take out of the Nile will become blood on the dry ground” (4:9). Why does God not know exactly how many miracles it will take to convince the elders? This text demonstrates that God does not have to know how many miracles it will take to achieve His purposes. He is absolutely confident in His ability to get the elders to listen to Moses, and competent to do what is necessary, even though working with free agents who are to some extent unpredictable. The fact that God was going to deliver the family of Abraham was certain; how many miracles it was going to take depended on the response of a few key leaders.³⁶

³² Westminster Confession of Faith, 3.1, cited in Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1180.

³³ See Exod. 13:17.

³⁴ See Jer. 26:3.

³⁵ See Jer. 38:17-18, 20-21 and Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 66.

³⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 67-68.

God is endlessly resourceful, creative and wise. God uses unimaginably wonderful ways to work and weave His purpose into the tapestry of history.³⁷

We have difficulty fathoming such a creative, wise, and lovingly powerful sovereignty. And this, perhaps, explains why many are inclined to assume that God needs an exhaustive blueprint of what is coming in order to accomplish His purposes. If we simply allow biblical texts to say what they seem to say, however, we are led to embrace the conclusion that God is *so* wise, resourceful, and sovereign over history that He doesn't need or want to have everything in the future settled ahead of time. He is *so* confident in His power and wisdom that He is willing to grant an appropriate degree of freedom to humans (and angels) to determine their own futures.³⁸

When Will You Come Home?

Scripture presents occasions in which God asks genuine questions about the future. "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?" (Num. 14:11). In this text as in many others, God *expects* Israel to respond to His loving initiatives and miraculous works, and is distraught at their stiff-necked disregard. Some have taken these texts as rhetorical questions, and this may be true; but "the fact that the Lord continues for centuries, with much frustration, to try to get the Israelites not to 'despise' Him and to be 'innocent' suggests that the wonder expressed in these questions was genuine. The duration of the Israelites' stubbornness was truly an open issue."³⁹ God is, in this view, truly interacting with man in give and take relationships.

An Affront to God?

Some have said that this understanding demeans God's glory and is evidence of man making God into His own image. Is seeing the future as open and full of possibilities really a reproach and an affront to God? Pinnock insightfully remarks, "God's not-knowing aspects of the future does not reflect on His ability to know because that is not dependent on a complete and perfect knowledge of the future. It is simply the nature of the creation project that its future is not altogether settled and, therefore, not altogether knowable."⁴⁰ In this manner,

God knows all there is to be known and the fact that some things cannot be known does not diminish the perfection of His knowledge. God knows the past, which is unalterable, the entire present, which is accessible, and a great deal about the future, so far as it can be foreseen,

³⁷ See Job 42:1-3; Rom. 11:33.

³⁸ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 68.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 100.

because He knows the constitutions, tendencies and powers of each person and has a full knowledge of His own purposes and how He plans to carry them out.⁴¹ History is not yet completely settled but is still being actualized. It has not been videotaped in advance. The possibilities have not yet all become actualities.⁴²

Are We Limiting God?

Why does the argument that we are limiting God come up by the traditionalists in regard to the way we understand His knowledge and not to the way we view His power? J.P. Moreland, a traditional Christian philosopher and apologist, says, “when theists say that God is all-powerful, they do not mean that God can do anything whatever, but only that He can do anything that power can do. God cannot make a square circle and He cannot cease to exist, but these are not limitations on His power since power is not relevant to them.”⁴³ In the same way, when we say that God is all knowing, we do not mean that God can know whatever, but only that knowledge which is *available*. Not knowing future actions that have not come into existence is no limitation at all.

Impassibility

Based on the Greek idea that God is “perfect” and therefore cannot and does not change, some early and later theologians and philosophers have deduced that God is impassible.⁴⁴ This means that God is utterly devoid of any passions or emotions. Pinnock rightly says that it is astonishing that “impassibility could have become orthodox belief in the early centuries.”⁴⁵ The sad thing is that church creeds that are still adamantly adhered to have crystallized such concepts. The first sentence in the Articles of Religion (1571), otherwise known as the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England, states, “God is without body, parts, and *passions*.” The Westminster Confession of Faith (1643-46) says that God is “without...passions” (2.1). On the other hand some have gone so far as to say, “Theology has no falser idea than that of the impassibility of God.”⁴⁶ Impassibility is definitely the most dubious of the divine attributes discussed in classical theism, suggesting that God does not grieve, experience sorrow, sadness, or pain.

⁴¹ This position is sometimes referred to as presentism, affirming omniscience, but denying exhaustive foreknowledge.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 101-102.

⁴³ J.P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987, 66.

⁴⁴ Others have based their view of impassibility on a contrived and mistranslated reading of Acts 14:15 in the KJV. See Eareckson Tada, *When God Weeps*, 245-246; Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 165-166.

⁴⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 89.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

We must speak boldly for the sake of the gospel: Augustine was wrong to have said that God does not grieve over the suffering of the world; Anselm was wrong to have said that God does not experience compassion; Calvin was wrong to have said that biblical figures that convey such things are mere accommodations to finite understanding. For too long pagan assumptions about God's nature have influenced theological reflection. Our thinking needs to be reformed in the light of the self-reflection of God in the gospel and we must stop attributing to God qualities that undermine God's own self-disclosure. Let us not treat the attributes of God independently of the Bible but view the biblical metaphors as reality-depicting descriptions of the living God, whose very being is self-giving love.⁴⁷

God is not apathetic, but deeply involved in His people's affairs. You would have to read the Bible with your eyes covered and ears plugged to believe that God is not emotionally drawn into and heavily concerned with the lives of those He created. God emphatically cries out:

Oh, how can I give you up, Israel? How can I let you go? How can I destroy you like Admah and Zeboiim? My heart is torn within me, and my compassion overflows.⁴⁸ No, I will not punish you as much as my burning anger tells me to. I will not completely destroy Israel, for I am God and not a mere mortal. I am the Holy One living among you, and I will not come to destroy (Hos. 11:8, 9, NLT).

Notice that God *hates* evil (Prov. 6:16-19), is *jealous* for glory (Ex. 20:5), and is full of *zeal*: "The LORD emerges like a hero, like a warrior He inspires Himself for battle; He shouts, yes He *yells*, He shows His enemies His power. 'I have been inactive for a long time; I kept quiet and held back. Like a woman in labor I groan; I pant and gasp'" (Isa. 42:13, 14, NET).

God also knows the most profound grief (Gen. 6:6; Eph. 4:30), and even *suffers* when His people do.⁴⁹ "Through all that they suffered, *He suffered too*" (Isa. 63:9). If these texts don't assume God feels, senses, and experiences emotion, we can readily assume that nothing can be known from Scripture. Once again the Bible is best understood and read without Platonic spectacles.

Immutability

Thomas Aquinas and others have reasoned that if God was truly in relationship to us, He would be somewhat dependent on us and this would be an imperfection of God. Therefore our relationship to God is "real," but God's

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁸ The NET reads, "All my *tender compassions* are aroused."

⁴⁹ God's heart sympathizes and even cries out for Moab (Isa. 15:5).

relationship to us is merely “logical.” In other words, God is like a “stone pillar,” Aquinas argued. The pillar may be on our right or left, but the relation to the pillar is always in us, not in the pillar.⁵⁰ Believe it or not, this argument is still fully active and in use today! Norman Geisler, a popular apologist, says, “When a person changes in relation to the pillar, the pillar does not change. Likewise, when we change in relation to God, God does not change.”⁵¹ Is this true? Is it even possible to have a relationship with someone who remains static, frozen, non-responsive, and immovable? Geisler even goes so far as to say that God “cannot change in *any* way.”⁵² The Hebrew Bible, completely unaware of this theory, is rather forthright in describing God as one who responds, reacts, changes, and even regrets choices He made that went awry.

Changing His Mind

In an unforgettable account in the book of Exodus, a sinful and rebellious Israel bows down and sacrifices to a molten calf at the foot of Sinai under the leadership of Aaron. God explodes, resounding to Moses, “I have seen this people, that they are a stiff-necked people. So now, leave me alone so that my anger can burn against them and that I may consume them; and I will make from you a great nation” (Exod. 32:9, 10, NASB). At this point, Moses boldly initiates a strong petition, seeking favor from God, even exclaiming, “Turn from your burning anger and *change Your mind* about doing harm to Your people” (32:12). In this instance, the Scripture portrays the future as alterable: “So the LORD *changed His mind* about the harm which He said He would do to His people” (32:14). If we are still conditioned to think that God really was not going to destroy the camp of Israel and had planned this whole drama an eternity in advance, let us be instructed by divine commentary in the book of Psalms which speaks of God destroying the hard-hearted people, “*had not* Moses His chosen one stood in the breach before Him, to turn away His wrath from destroying them” (106:23). Moses apparently thought that God *could* and would change His mind. This raises the question, “If God *can* change His mind, can God be trusted? Yes. As the biblical narrative progresses, it becomes clear that God remains faithful to His overarching goals.”⁵³ As seen above, “whether God destroys the Israelites and begins again with Moses or decides to continue working with the people, God remains faithful to His promise to Abraham and His project of developing a people of faith.”⁵⁴ Therefore, “God remains

⁵⁰ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 156; *The Openness of God*, 87.

⁵¹ David Basinger and Randall Basinger, eds., *Predestination and Freewill: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986, 134.

⁵² *Ibid*, emphasis added.

⁵³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 66.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*.

unchangeable in His commitment to this project of redemption but remains flexible regarding precisely when, where and how it is carried out.”⁵⁵ In fact, it is God’s unchanging, good, loving, merciful, sympathetic, and personal constitution that compels Him to relent from sending calamity (Jonah 4:2). These are not isolated texts found in the corners of revelation, but the Bible is replete with instances where God is said to “repent” or “change His mind” because of changing circumstances and new states of affairs, especially the outcries of His people.⁵⁶ In fact, there are nearly 40 texts that explicitly say God relents and changes His mind.⁵⁷ This being the case, how can conventional theism relegate God to immobility by saying God does not really relent, nor change His mind?

Not Changing His Mind

Two texts in the Hebrew Scriptures are clutched onto in order to discount, rob, and strip the majority of texts of their natural force. It is said that these two verses reveal the real truth about God and the others are merely figurative and symbolic anthropomorphisms in which God accommodates our limitedness as a nurse lisps to a young child.⁵⁸ Is this true? If we look at the context and the Hebrew parallelism used in these texts that say God does not relent, we find out that they merely teach that God does not lie when He makes an *irrevocable decision* as sin-touched, mortal men times do. “God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should change His mind” (Num. 23:19, NIV).

God is not fickle, capricious, whimsical, erratic, and unreliable in His *final* decisions. God reserves the right to *not reverse* any decision He makes. In the passage quoted above, God refuses to reverse a *particular decision* that He made to bless and not curse Israel. As for 1 Samuel 15:29, “The Preeminent One of Israel does not go back on His word or change His mind, for He is not a human being who changes His mind” (NET), this verse is dealing with God’s *unconditional, unalterable decree* to remove Saul from kingship as the preceding verse indicates: “The LORD has *torn* the kingdom of Israel from you this day and has *given* it to one of your colleagues who is better than you!”⁵⁹ Understanding these texts in this way allows us to take both texts as meaningful and relevant. Neither set of verses in this manner is squelched and relinquished to *mere* anthropomorphic accommodation.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ See Num. 11:1-2; 14:12-20; 16:20-48; Deut. 14:12-21; 1 Kings 21:21-29; 2 Chron. 12:5-8; Jer. 26:2-3; Ezek. 4:9-15; Amos 7:1-6.

⁵⁷ Clark Pinnock, ed., *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, Minneapolis: Bethany, 1989, 176.

⁵⁸ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 67.

⁵⁹ NET Bible comment on 1 Sam. 15:29, study note 16.

Traditional Timelessness

Another commonly held and taught notion about God is that He is outside of time. In this view, God does not experience “a succession of moments or any progress from one state of existence to another. To God Himself, all of His existence is always somehow ‘present.’”⁶⁰ Wayne Grudem goes on to explain that in God’s own being, “God is timeless; He does not experience a succession of moments.”⁶¹ He continues, “This has been the dominant view of Christian orthodoxy throughout the history of the church, though it has been frequently challenged, and even today many theologians deny it.”⁶² Why is this supposed axiom being brought under such high scrutiny? Most likely it is because Scripture speaks of God in time, not out of it (if there is even such a thing).⁶³ Our concept of time is merely how we measure change.⁶⁴ Every word in Scripture presupposes that God acts in *sequence*. God is the LORD of history, living, breathing, acting, and performing awesome works in historical succession throughout time, not out of it.

Suppose that God were timeless and experienced events in the world simultaneously, as most conventional theists think. Would God know what time it is now and would God be able to pursue purposes within history? And, what could it possibly mean to say that God knows Julius Caesar and Winton Churchill as living at the same time? How does God plan, think, remember and respond? What sort of a person would a timeless person be? Clearly it would be better, whatever our concept of this, to live as if God were everlasting and not timeless.⁶⁵

Along these lines, it seems to be totally meaningless to say that what happened in 1375 AD and what will transpire in 2099 AD are alike present somewhere in the land of timelessness.⁶⁶ It is much better to understand God as Scripture presents Him, as being everlasting or eternal in that there was never a time in which God did not exist and never will be.

⁶⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 169. In the same sentence Grudem does admit that this idea is difficult to understand.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 168-70. In order to give a fair representation of Wayne Grudem’s position, it must be noted that he also sees God acting and seeing events in time as well.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶³ I agree with Clark Pinnock who says that it “is hard to form any idea of what timelessness might mean, since all of our thinking is temporally conditioned” in *The Openness of God*, 120.

⁶⁴ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 131.

⁶⁵ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 156.

⁶⁶ Basinger, *Predestination and Free Will*, 156.

Common Objections

Entire books have been written attempting to rebut the points made in this article. The purpose of this article is not to defend the Open View, but rather to give an introduction to the view. Hence, only a few objections and texts will be considered.

What About Prophecy?

Bible prophecy can be accounted for in light of the Open View in one of three ways. Firstly, much, if not most, prophecy in Scripture, although not always stated explicitly, is inherently conditional. This primary paradigm is spoken about in Jeremiah 18:1-10.

The LORD said to Jeremiah: “Go down at once to the potter’s house. I will speak to you further there.” So I went down to the potter’s house and found him working at his wheel. Now and then there would be something wrong⁶⁷ with the pot he was molding from the clay with his hands. Then he would rework the clay into another pot as he saw fit. Then the LORD said to me, “I the LORD say, O nation of Israel, can I not deal with you as this potter deals with the clay? In my hands, you, O nation of Israel, are just like the clay in the potter’s hand. There are times, Jeremiah, when I threaten to uproot, tear down, and destroy a nation or kingdom. But if that nation that I threatened stops doing wrong, I will forgo the destruction I intended to do to it. And there are times when I promise to build up and establish a nation or a kingdom. But if that nation does what displeases me and does not obey me, then I will forgo the good I promised to do to it” (NET).

From this text we are now able to understand how God can prophesy unequivocally through Jonah: “At the end of forty days, Nineveh will be overthrown!” We read a few verses later, “God relented concerning the judgment He had threatened them with and He did not destroy them” (Jonah 3:10, NET). Another classic example is found in 2 Kings 20:1:

In those days Hezekiah was stricken with a terminal illness. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz visited him and told him, “This is what the LORD says, ‘Give instructions to your household, for you are about to die; *you will not get well*’” (NET).

⁶⁷ This motif, blaming the pot or the clay (which probably had a lump, was too moist, or not moist enough), needs to be kept in mind when reading Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11. It is also important to note that there is not a one to one relationship between people (nations) and clay as some Calvinists imply. The text proceeds to say that people (nations) can “stop doing wrong,” whereas clay is unable to do anything (18:8).

After a heart-bursting prayer and plea, God tells Isaiah, Go back and tell Hezekiah, the leader of my people: “This is what the LORD God of your ancestor David says: ‘I have heard your prayer; I have seen your tears. Look, *I will heal you*. The day after tomorrow you will go up to the LORD’s temple. I will add fifteen years to your life’” (2 Kings 20:5-6, NET).

These texts highlight the often times *unspoken*, inherently conditional nature of prophecy.

Secondly, biblical prophecy can be accounted for in light of the Open View by the fact that other prophecies are God’s decision to act unilaterally and accomplish His will in whatever manner He desires. Thirdly, other biblical prophecies are predictions based on inevitable or likely consequences of the present.⁶⁸ By way of caution, it would be wise to rethink the way we normally interpret and understand the Jewish fulfillment of prophecy. Sometimes the Jewish authors of Scripture see a parallel in the life and ministry of Jesus and say that a text from the Torah has been fulfilled.⁶⁹ It seems that what is occurring is that they are seeing events in the past happening again in the present and therefore say, “thus it is fulfilled.” These texts do not seem to be predictions necessarily, but these passages from the Torah are being “recapitulated” in the life of Jesus.⁷⁰

Isaiah 46:10 and Isaiah 48:3-5

Kevin Gilbert of Lipscomb University says:

Since the conceptual boundaries in this immediate context are limited to the deliverance of God’s people, I would suggest that an extrapolation from “I (repeatedly) declare the end (deliverance) from the beginning,” (i.e., Noah and family; Lot and family; Israel from Egypt) to dogmatic universal principle (like “God absolutely determines all things”) is exegetically suspect. Furthermore, it is literarily unnecessary. Reconsider the text: “I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning.” Note that He does not indicate that He declares all ends from the beginning. To infer from the text that God means that He determines absolutely everything is grammatically/syntactically unnecessary. He declares what will be as it relates to this specific occasion, not universally; neither does He declare the specific means to that end.⁷¹

⁶⁸ See 1 Sam. 23:10-12; Jer. 38:17-18, 20-21, 23.

⁶⁹ See Hos. 11:1; Matt. 2:15; Zech. 11:12; Jer. 32:6-9; Matt. 27:9.

⁷⁰ E-mail dialogue between John Sanders and Chris Hall found at www.opentheism.org.

⁷¹ “Isa. 46:10,” <http://www.opentheism.org/is__4610.htm>.

What Difference Does It Make?

The common adage, “Beliefs affect behaviors,” is true. What one really thinks ultimately and eventually will be displayed in one’s life. Genuine faith produces authentic actions. The “open view promotes action not resignation. We face possibilities, not just foregone conclusions; there are things to be settled.”⁷²

Conventional theism in its various forms undermines this in one way or another. It suffers from the condition of existential self-contradiction. One may think that everything is settled but not act like it, because that would lead to paralysis; most people will pray anyway, as if it were not. Why get up in the morning, if you think everything about the day is already decided? Believing that would rob you of every purposeful impulse; why move a finger? You cannot even fight evil without fighting God. Though it is safe to live on the basis of openness thinking, it is not safe to live on the basis of conventional thinking. It may be exhilarating to discuss it intellectually, but you cannot take it seriously practically because it can destroy your sense of personal responsibility. It can make prayer meaningless and evangelism unnecessary and undermine one’s will to live and act.⁷³

Concluding Remarks

Our observations have shown that much pagan philosophy has been read into the Hebrew Bible. We have agreed with H.P. Owen who said, “As far as the western world is concerned, (classical) theism has a double origin in the Bible and Greek philosophy.”⁷⁴ God is not an omni-causing, dominating puppeteer pulling each and every string in the world. God is not a ventriloquist who believes in and prays to Himself through us. God is not a playwright who singularly authors the entire script. In fact, He is sovereign over His own sovereignty!⁷⁵ The God we refer to as “Abba” sovereignly chose to create a different kind of world in which there are *significant* others who would be able to have personal, reciprocal relations with Him. God did not “want to dance alone, dance with a mannequin or hire someone who is obligated to dance with Him. God wants to dance with us as persons in fellowship, not with puppets or contracted performers, and thus needs our consent.”⁷⁶ God is not into

⁷² Basinger, 155.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁵ Pinnock put it this way: “Ask yourself this question: could the Creator, if He so chose, create a world the future of which would be partly settled and knowable, and partly unsettled and unknowable? If He chose to do so, does not this world have the appearance of being such a place? If you think He cannot, then who has diminished divine sovereignty?” See Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 108.

⁷⁶ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 210-11.

manipulation, raw power, and dictating everything that occurs throughout history.

God is not unaffected, static, immobile, frozen, and unchanging toward His creation; rather changing and relenting from sending calamity is a primary characteristic of our God and Father, who is love.⁷⁷ We've seen how the theory that God knows in certain terms every future event raises insurmountable problems such as, "How can a conditional promise be genuine if God already foreknows the human response and so foreknows that He will, in fact, never fulfill the promise?"⁷⁸ If God had exhaustive future foreknowledge why would He have such heart-rending reactions if He had foreseen or personally ordained in eternity past the terrible sins described in Scripture? We see in clearer terms now that Plato's perfect deity who is unable to change falls woefully short of the one and only true God of Israel. Yes, God is the greatest conceivable being, but we have found that the perfect God revealed in Scripture has the *most* possibilities open to Him, is *more* free, and *more* sensitive to change than His creatures.⁷⁹ This is good news and should cause us to hold our heads up high, for our God and Father is truly awe-inspiring.

⁷⁷ See Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:13; 1John 4:16.

⁷⁸ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 131.

⁷⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 131.