

The God Who Doesn't Know (part 2)

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In Part 1, I defined open theism, examined its history, included some statements made by its adherents, and started examining Scriptures used by open theists to support their view. In this concluding article, I finish examining the Scriptures and end with the dangers of open theism.

Jonah 3: Open theists likewise cite the case of Jonah. In *Jonah 3:2*, God tells Jonah, "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I give you." What was the message? We read in verse 4, "Jonah began to enter into the city a day's journey, and he cried out, and said, 'Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!'" And the beginning of verse 5 tells us, "The people of Nineveh believed God." So, what did they do? God says they will be overthrown and they believe Him. Did they say, Oh well, there's nothing we can do about it? No. They understood that what God said was intended to get them to repent. So, "they proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from their greatest even to their least." And the king issued a proclamation for a fast, ending with the statement, "Who knows whether God will not turn and relent, and turn away from his fierce anger, so that we might not perish?" (verse 9). Verse 10 says, "God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way. God relented of the disaster which he said he would do to them, and he didn't do it."

The king of Nineveh understood that what God said was not an absolute but was conditional upon repentance. But did God intend it to be absolute and then change His mind upon their repentance, as open theism claims? Did He not see that they would repent? Is what we see here not something God planned in eternity, but simply a reaction of God working in time as the open theists teach? Well, if the open theists are right, then we must ask, If God really intended to wipe out Nineveh, why did He send Jonah to them? Is it not clear that God wanted to bring about the repentance of the Ninevites? Their destruction was the logical extension of their sinful course, but it was not a reality. God had decreed in eternity that they would repent, and that was the only real future they had.

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But why does the Bible state, "God relented of the disaster which he said he would do to them, and he didn't do it"? Must we believe in a God who actually repents and changes His mind? No. Why? Because there is a Scripture that tells us that He certainly does not repent: "God is not a man, that he should lie, nor the son of man, that he should repent. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not make it good?" (Numbers 23:19). Also, the Bible tells us, "For I, the LORD, don't change" (Malachi 3:6a), and, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, nor turning shadow" (James 1:17).

"Repent" in Numbers 23:19 is from the same Hebrew word translated "relent" in Jonah 3:10 and similar Scriptures describing what seems to be God changing His mind. So the clear statement in Numbers 23:19 tells us that, whatever may appear to be going on in Jonah 3:10, God is not repenting or changing His mind. What is going on here is that God is depicting Himself in a way that is not characteristic of Him for the sake of our learning a lesson. He is not lying or trying to deceive us, because He plainly tells us in other Scriptures that He does not change and repent. God presents Himself here in Jonah and in a number of other Scriptures in an anthropomorphic way (that is, with human attributes and emotions) so we can learn something. What are we to learn?

I think what we are to learn can be summed up by a few other verses. The first is what Jesus said in Luke 13:3 (and 5): "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way." Another is James 5:16b: "The insistent prayer of a righteous person is powerfully effective." These verses are not saying that God will change His mind because of our repentance and prayer. We can see this in what Jesus, just before giving His model prayer, clearly states: "Your Father knows what things you need, before you ask him" (Matthew 6:8). Unlike the God of open theism, the God of the Bible already knows what He is going to do, but He wants us to repent and pray. In fact, when we pray, it is because God has in eternity decreed that we will pray. In other words, God has not only decreed the outcome but also the secondary cause that He will use—our prayers—to bring about that outcome.

God is the primary cause of all things. But He frequently uses secondary causes to bring these things about. For example, God not only decreed that Jesus would be arrested. He also decreed that Judas would betray Jesus. Judas' betrayal was the secondary cause that God

used to bring about His purpose. So, God not only decreed that He would heal Hezekiah, He also decreed the secondary cause, which was Hezekiah's prayer. God not only decreed He would save the Ninevites from destruction, He also decreed the secondary cause that would bring about His saving them, their repentance and prayers. In this way, God makes the people who pray parties with Him in the effect. Paul expresses this principle in 1 Corinthians 3:9 when he says, "For we are God's fellow workers."

I believe God gets us involved this way for our own sakes. But we must remember that God is really the ultimate cause of all things, but He wants us to pray, and so we should. You might ask, If we don't pray, will God still perform the good deed? The question is moot. Because if God has determined that we will pray for something, then we will. It can be likened to what Jesus says about binding and loosing: "I will give to you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth *will have been* bound in heaven; and whatever you release on earth *will have been* released in heaven" (Matthew 16:19, emphasis added). We are reigning with Christ and participating with Him in what He has already determined.

God purposely brought Hezekiah to repentance and prayer for his own good. He led the Ninevites to repentance as a message, perhaps to them, but especially to Jonah (who rebelled at the lesson) that He rules in the kingdoms of men (see Daniel 4:17) and that he will be gracious and merciful to whom He will (see Exodus 33:19). And, even more than this, He did these things for our sakes: "Now all these things happened to them by way of example, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). So God sometimes presents Himself in an anthropomorphic way—having human emotions and attributes such as repentance—so that we can learn a lesson. But I want to repeat that He is not being deceitful, because He clearly tells us elsewhere that He does not really have human attributes.

Exodus 32 and Numbers 14: In Exodus 32 and Numbers 14 God says He is going to destroy Israel for their disobedience, but does not do so after Moses entreats Him. Are we to believe that Moses thought of something God did not when he told God what the Egyptians and other nations would think (Exodus 32:12; Numbers 14:13-16)? Are we supposed to think that God really had to be reminded of His promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Israel (Exodus 32:13), and of his claim to being slow to anger, etc. (Number 14:17-18)? Is God really so witless? No.

One open theist, John Sanders, tries to present a different support for the open theist claim that God changed His mind in these verses:

Apparently, Moses has a relationship with God such that God values what Moses desires. If Moses interprets God's intentions in an unfavorable way and God values his relationship with Moses, then God must either persuade Moses or concede his request. It is unlikely that Moses presents God with new information. The real basis for the change in God's decision comes from a forceful presentation by one who is in a special relationship with God. With Moses' prayer, the decision-making situation is now altered for God. Being in relationship with Moses, God is willing to allow him to influence the path he will take. God permits human input into the divine future. One of the most remarkable features in the Old Testament is that people can argue with God and win.

John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998) 12

But what about Nineveh? Its inhabitants were not in a special relationship with God; they were pagans and God's enemies. No, like Dagon, Sander's open theist explanation falls on its face before the sovereign God (see 1 Samuel 5:3-4). As in the other examples cited earlier, God, using anthropomorphism, put Moses into a position to act as an intercessor on Israel's behalf for Moses' and our sakes.

Jeremiah 3:6-7, 19-20:

Moreover, the LORD said to me in the days of Josiah the king, "Have you seen that which backsliding Israel has done? She has gone up on every high mountain and under every green tree, and has played the prostitute there. I said after she had done all these things, 'She will return to me;' but she didn't return; and her treacherous sister Judah saw it."

Jeremiah 3:6-7

But I said, "How I desire to put you amongst the children, and give you a pleasant land, a goodly heritage of the armies of the nations!" and I said, "You shall call me 'My Father', and shall not turn away from following me." Surely as a wife treacherously departs from her husband, so you

have dealt treacherously with me, house of Israel," says the LORD.

Jeremiah 3:19-20

The open theist position on these verses is that God knew the future only as possibilities. He knew that Israel might return to Him or it might not, but, given the circumstances, He saw Israel's return as more probable. Thus, He really thought (the Bible uses the word "said") "she will return to me" and "You shall call me 'My Father', and shall not turn away from following me." And God was genuinely surprised when Israel did not return to Him and call Him "my Father."

Now, although the open theists say that they don't believe God makes mistakes, their position here certainly implies that He did. Is this a necessary interpretation of these verses? Not at all.

The simple and natural understanding of these verses is that God presented Himself in an anthropomorphic manner in what He said. I want to emphasize that the open theist' allegation that God thought these things is brazenly wrong. The Bible only states that He said these things. He said them for the sake of some in Israel and for our sakes. Why? God wanted us to understand how, if He were human, He would have reasoned that Israel would have returned to Him and how He would have felt when she did not. As an author does in a story, and as Jesus did in some of His parables (see, for example, Matthew 21:33-41), God is trying to engage our minds to enable us to see how reasonable Israel's return would have been, and He is engaging our emotions to enable us to feel how treacherous Israel was.

Genesis 6:6: Genesis 6:6 tells us, "The LORD was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him in his heart." Was God really sorry, grieved, that He had ever made man? Open theists would have you believe so. But no, God was not surprised or grieved by man's sin. He intended in eternity to save the elect from their sins through His Son Jesus Christ. So He was not sorry He'd made people. God was simply using human terms to lay a foundation for what He was about to do in destroying most of humankind. He wants us, in reading this, to see how a human would feel if he'd made mankind and it became so wicked.

So we see that the Scriptures open theism presents as its evidence are really not grounds for taking the drastic step of changing our understanding of God. At every turn, with every Scripture, open theism is proved a wrong and faithless response to God's revelation of

Himself in His Word. But have no doubt about it, its thinking is permeating our culture.

The Danger of Open Theism

This article is not just an academic exercise. It is a warning. If you believe that God knows the future only as possibilities, if you believe that God does not know the future as a sure reality, if you believe that God does not know what humans will choose, if you believe that God comes to wrong conclusions about what people will do (makes mistakes), if you believe that God expects things to happen that do not, if you believe that God regrets things He has done, you are on the road to skepticism. What basis do you have for any hope that God will accomplish His plan of salvation? Open theists admit that God is not just interacting with men as free moral agents but that God is interacting with demonic powers as well. But a God who has the characteristics the open theists attribute to Him might at any time drop the ball and lose the game to Satan and his team. What assurance can you have that He won't? As Gregory Boyd admits,

In a cosmos populated by free agents, the outcome of things—even divine decisions—is often uncertain.

Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 58

It is true that according to the open view things can happen in our lives that God didn't plan or even foreknow with certainty (though he always foreknew they were possible). This means that in the open view things can happen to us that have no overarching divine purpose. In this view, "trusting in God" provides no assurance that everything that happens to us will reflect his divine purposes, for there are other agents who also have power to affect us, just as we have power to affect others. This, it must be admitted, can for some be a scary thought.

Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 153

Scary? It is a vision straight out of sword and sorcery fantasy; it is a cosmos of good versus evil and who knows who will win?

But open theists are willing to suffer this chaos as long as they can exalt man's free will. To open theists, free will is sacred and inviolable. Thus, they must do away with the Sovereign God who has determined and predestined everything in eternity and who foreknows the future as reality. In His place, they must raise up a weak God who has

chosen not to determine everything or anything, who has not predestined specific individuals to be saved, who, lest He step on the toes of the idol of free will, has chosen not to know. We and the demons, using free will, act, and God reacts. Sometimes He gets it right, and sometimes He gets it wrong. But, so what? God will just keep stumbling along, and we'll get to exercise our free will.

The open theism view of God will have its effect upon every aspect of the theology of its adherents. And as you might guess, like leaven in a lump, the views of open theism will find their way into seminaries, churches, and Christian books, often without even being labeled as open theism.

Immensely popular Christian author, Philip Yancey, does not claim to be an open theist and is not normally thought of as being one. Yet, as these sample quotes reveal, he certainly teaches open theism in his books.

We have, instead, a relationship with God based on constant negotiation. We inform God what we think should be done in the world, and in the process God reminds us of our own role in doing it. Rarely do we get everything we want, and I imagine the same holds true for God.

Philip Yancey, *Prayer: Does It Make Any Difference?*
(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006) 241

God made himself weak for one purpose: to let human beings choose freely for themselves what to do with him.

Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*
(Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995) 76

Dallas Willard specifically denied being an open theist (see <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/rogereolson/2013/05/r-i-p-dallas-willard-and-was-he-an-open-theist/>), yet this quote from one of his books shows that he taught it.

God's 'response' to our prayers is not a charade. He does not pretend that he is answering our prayer when he is only doing what he was going to do anyway. Our requests really do make a difference in what God does or does not do.

Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy, Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*
(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 244

Cofounder of Willow Creek Community Church, Gilbert Bilezikian, is not thought of as being an open theist, but his writing shows that he is.

Because God is a personal being, the Bible describes him as being capable of experiencing emotions, such as surprise, disappointment, indignation, pleasure, and love.... At times, however, the Bible also registers God's surprise, disappointment, and even regret at the discovery of what happens on the human scene, as if he were suddenly becoming aware of it for the first time.... In order to respect the integrity of human freedom and not to interfere with its exercise, God often seems to limit his awareness of their actions—as if he were surrounding them with a bubble of non-interference, sheltering them from the full scope of his omniscience.

Gilbert Bilezikian, *Christianity 101* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993) 27, 29

Richard J. Foster's readers are probably not trying to beware of open theism when they read his books, but it is certainly there.

In our efforts to pray it is easy for us to be defeated right at the outset because we have been taught that everything in the universe is already set, and so things cannot be changed. And if things cannot be changed, why pray?... Moses prayed boldly because he believed his prayers could change things, even God's mind.

Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998) 35

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It then occurred to me that after God made all this, he pronounced it *good*, for heaven's sake. It's his way of letting us know he rather prefers adventure, danger, risk,

the element of surprise. This whole creation is unapologetically *wild*. God loves it that way.

John Eldridge, *Wild at Heart, Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010) 32 (emphases in original)

...we wouldn't *be* at all if God hadn't taken that enormous risk of creating us in the first place."

ibid. 205 (emphasis in original)

We must remain vigilant against such false teachings, and such vigilance is possible only if each of us makes it our business to know God's Word.

Fortunately, the Unknowing God is only a figment of the imagination. He is certainly not the God of the Bible. He is the remaking of God in man's image and is virtually in the same category as the idols Paul writes of in Romans 1:22-23: "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and traded the glory of the incorruptible God for the likeness of an image of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed animals, and creeping things."

The God of the Bible says, "Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is no other. I am God, and there is none like me. I declare the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things that are not yet done. I say: My counsel will stand, and I will do all that I please" (Isaiah 46:9-10). The resurrected and glorified Christ says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give freely to him who is thirsty from the spring of the water of life" (Revelation 21:6). Psalm 33:11 states, "The counsel of the LORD stands fast forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations." Jesus tells us, "From now on, I tell you before it happens, that when it happens, you may believe that I am he" (John 13:19). Again, Jesus says, "Aren't two sparrows sold for an assarion coin? Not one of them falls on the ground apart from your Father's will, but the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Therefore don't be afraid. You are of more value than many sparrows" (Matthew 10:29-31). None of these statements can be true if God doesn't know, if "the outcome of things—even divine decisions—is often uncertain," if "things can happen in our lives that God didn't plan or even foreknow," if "things can happen to us that have no overarching divine purpose." Fortunately, God is omniscient in the true sense of the word—He knows all things including the future as reality, and all that He has decreed, including every detail of your life, will come to pass.

We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28