

The Bible and the Open View of the Future

by Gregory A Boyd

Forward

The following is an abbreviated excerpt from the rough draft of the fourth chapter in my forthcoming book *Satan and the Problem of Evil* (IVP).¹ The central purpose of this book is to render philosophically persuasive the biblical "warfare world view" and "warfare theodicy" which I argued for in *God at War: The Bible and Spiritual Conflict* (IVP, 1997): This particular chapter is concerned with fleshing out the implications of the view that God takes something of a risk in creating free beings (which I presume to be established in the preceding chapters).

After over viewing and critiquing the two primary Arminian understandings of exhaustively definite foreknowledge (EDF), I present a biblical case for seeing the future as being partly open. This is the section included below. In the three chapters which follow this one, I answer the biblical case made by defenders of exhaustively definite foreknowledge and address objections which are customarily raised against this view.

Introduction

There is a third way of understanding divine foreknowledge, which I believe, avoids the difficulties of the above two views. But it does so by denying that God possesses EDF, and for this reason it is somewhat controversial. It is generally labeled "open theism" because it holds that God faces a partly open future. It denies that future self-determining actions are more than possibilities before agents actualize them, and thus it affirms that God knows them as possibilities until agents actualize them. This view thus affirms, without any logical difficulty, that God enters into a somewhat risky endeavor in creating the world. And for this and other reasons I believe it is the perspective, which best fits the warfare world view.

Open Theism and Scripture

For all biblical theists the final court of appeal regarding any position that is a candidate for our acceptance is Scripture. As important as philosophical arguments may be, they must ride on the coat tails of exegetical arguments. And so we turn to consider whether or not Scripture supports the view that God faces a partly open future.

What This Issue Is All About. Despite repeated accusations against open theists to the contrary, no one disputes that the Bible unequivocally teaches that God knows the whole of reality exhaustively. The point is so obvious. For example, the Bible portrays God as having an exhaustive perspective on every aspect of creation (Job 28:24; Ps. 33:13-15). He knows the number of the stars and angels (Ps. 147:4; Isa. 40:26). No creature on earth, nor even a hair on a person's head, can pass away without God's knowing it (Mt. 10:29-

30). God knows everything about the deeds, the thoughts, even the innermost intentions of all people (e.g. I Chr. 28:9; Job 24:23; 31:4; 34:21; Ps. 119:168; 139:23-24; Jer. 16:17; 17:9-10; Lk. 16:15; Acts 1:24; Rom. 8:27; I Cor. 4:5; I Jn. 3:19-20).

There is, in short, absolutely nothing that exists that is not exhaustively known by the Creator. The point is not only a biblical truism; it is, I have elsewhere argued, also a metaphysically necessary truth. God's knowledge and reality mutually define each other.²

The dispute is thus not over *whether* God knows everything, but rather over what *constitutes* the "everything" which God perfectly knows. The classical-philosophical tradition, of course, generally held that "everything" included the whole of the future. Others now argue, however, that the future is in part an aspect of the "everything" which God knows only as a realm of indefinite possibilities. The future is thus partly a realm of "possibly this and possibly that instead of exhaustively a realm of "definitely this and definitely not that." And since God knows reality perfectly, he knows *this* reality as such.

Clearly, then, the debate between these two camps is not about whether or not God knows everything. Indeed, if we are speaking most accurately, we should not even say that it's a debate about whether or not God knows the future perfectly. Both sides affirm this. The debate is rather over the question, What is the ontological status of the future *now*, which God perfectly knows? Does God's omniscience include or exclude ontological possibilities?³

With this, it should be noted at the outset that the traditional view does not ascribe to God a more exalted form of omniscience than does the open view, though this accusation is frequently made against the open view. God's knowledge is not lessened or made greater by the content of what God knows.

To illustrate, let us say that there are two people who agree that God is omniscient but disagree about (say) how many chairs there are in a particular room. One person claims there are ten chairs while the other claims there are eleven. Surely the person who says there are eleven chairs and that God therefore knows there are eleven chairs isn't thereby ascribing to God a more exalted view of omniscience than the one who thinks that God knows there are only ten chairs in the room. For they agree that however many chairs there are God knows that there are this many and not more or less. What they disagree about is not the quality of God's knowledge but about the content of a particular segment of reality.

The situation is exactly the same regarding the disagreement between defenders of EDF and open theists. The first claims that the contents of "the room of the future" are exhaustively definite (definitely this and definitely not that) while the second claims that this room includes indefinite possibilities (possibly this and possibly that). Both agree that whatever is in this room of the future God perfectly knows it. What they disagree over has nothing to do with the quality of God's knowledge. They are disagreeing over the content of a particular aspect of reality--namely, the future.

Much unfortunate confusion, fear, and division has been generated between defenders of EDF and open theists because this point has not been realized. We are disagreeing over the ontological status of futurity, nothing more. It is in truth a rather minute metaphysical debate. Aside from some possible practical consequences (discussed in the next chapter) it only becomes important when we attempt to work through with logical consistency and biblical fidelity the warfare approach to understanding evil.

In any event, the all-important question is, which view is correct? The view that the definiteness of the future is eternally present to be known by an omniscient mind obviously has tradition on its side. It has in fact been the dominant view in western society since Plato. But this tradition, while weighty to be sure, must not settle the truth question for the believer, for traditions can be and have been to some extent wrong. The most important question for the believer is, does the classical-philosophical view of the future and thus of God's knowledge of the future have Scripture on its side? With all due respect for the weight of tradition, I for one must honestly confess that I do not believe that it does.

The Sovereign Lord of History. To begin, it is very clear that many things about the future are assumed to be definite in the Bible, made so either by God's sovereign design or by inevitable consequences of processes taking place in the present. The theme is strongest in Isaiah. As a way of distinguishing himself from the dead idols that the Israelites were inclined to chase after, Yahweh declares:

*I am the Lord, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.
See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them. (Isa. 42:8-9)*

The declaration is made as a challenge several chapters later when the Lord asks,

*Who is like me? Let them proclaim it,
let them declare and set it forth before me,
Who has announced from of old the things to come?
Let them tell us what is yet to be.
Do not fear, or be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it? (Isa. 44:7-8a)*

Clearly, the Lord is in command of the flow of history and therefore has a perspective on

its future which neither mere human beings nor worthless idols can have. Again, several chapters later we read an even more dramatic declaration of this same truth.

*The former things I declared long ago,
they went out from my mouth and I made them known;
then suddenly I did them and they came to pass.
Because I know that you are obstinate...
I declared them to you from long ago,
before they came to pass I announced them to you,
so that you would not say, "My idol did then..." (Isa. 48:3-5)*

Finally, this motif is perhaps most emphatically expressed in Isaiah 46 when the Lord proclaims:

*...I am God, and there is no other;
I am God, and there is no one like me,
declaring the end from the beginning
and from ancient times things not yet done,
saying "My purpose shall stand,
and I will fulfill my intention!"...
I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass;
I have planned, and I will do it. (Isa. 46:9-11)*

The point of this inspired testimony is to demonstrate that the one true God is Lord of history, not some dead idol. Whatever Yahweh decides to do in history he can most certainly carry out!. And to prove it and distinguish himself from idols, Yahweh tells his people what he's going to do ahead of time. "The former things I declared long ago...then suddenly I did them and they came to pass...so that you would not say, 'my idol did them'"(Isa. 48:3, 5, emphasis added).

However, the point is not that the Lord has an exhaustively comprehensive and detailed perspective on the future; it's rather that the Lord is the one controlling history. He declares events *he's going to perform* in the future to prove that he, and not some idol, is the one doing them.

Similarly, when the Lord tells his people that it is he who "declares the end from the beginning," he immediately adds "My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention...I have planned, and I will do it" (Isa. 46: 10, emphasis added). Clearly, whatever the Lord himself is going to do he foreknows (though it doesn't say he knew this from eternity) and again, he declares this foreknowledge as a means of proving that it is he, not some idol, that is doing it.

But do these passages teach that the future is eternally and exhaustively settled in the mind of God? Only if they also teach that the future is exhaustively and unilaterally determined by God. But the texts do not go this far. And, in any case, there is another strong motif of Scripture which quite explicitly presents God as facing a partly open future. The tradition has tended to affirm the first motif at the expense of the second. Our approach is to rather suggest that we affirm both motifs of Scripture equally. If Scripture portrays God as sometimes facing a determined future and sometimes facing an open future, our view is that the future must be partly determined and partly undetermined.

The force of this view can only be appreciated by an examination of this often minimized second motif of Scripture. To this we now turn.

Open Ended Prophecies

The first piece of biblical material we need to examine is a strand of the biblical tradition that has actually often been used to argue against the view that the future is to some extent open. It concerns biblical prophecies. The Bible is full of amazing prophecies that were fulfilled at a later date. We find some incredible information about the Messiah, for example, centuries before he was born. We also at times find detailed information about the future destruction of particular cities (such as Tyre in Ezek. 28). How could God make such accurate prophetic predictions, it is frequently argued, unless he possessed exhaustive knowledge of what was to come?

In reply, some prophecies are simply unconditional declarations of what the Lord himself is going to do, as mentioned above. It's not a matter of seeing into the future. It's simply a matter of God knowing his own intentions in the present. Other long-range prophecies, however, involve the free decisions of creatures. Some of these appear quite unconditional as well. If such prophecies are in fact unconditional, and if the acts prophesied are too far in the future to be surmised from the present characters of the agents involved, and if the acts prophesied are in fact self-determining acts, then this would in principle refute the open view.

On closer inspection, however, it usually turns out that such prophecies only appeared unconditional at the time they were made. In actuality their fulfillment was conditioned upon the future decisions of free creatures. They were, in fact, "open-ended."

Jonah and the Repentant Ninevites. For example, the Lord had Jonah proclaim, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon.3:4b). This sounds like a straightforward unconditional prognosis of what was going to happen in the future. The Ninevites fortunately did not take this prophecy in this fashion, however, for they set about to repent of their evil saying, "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish" (Jon. 3:9). According to the Bible, this is exactly what God did.

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their

evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it. (Jon. 3: 10)

Two points are worth noting about this episode. First, it demonstrates that futuristic decrees do not necessarily entail that the contents of the decrees are unalterable. It may be that the futuristic decree is actually a present warning saying that *if things do not change* this is what is going to happen. The statements are thus probabilistic regarding consequences of the present, and they are conditioned on present behavior. In other words, they do not entail that God's mind is a sort of crystal ball, which sees into the future.

If Nineveh had not repented, of course, the inspired decree that Nineveh was going to perish in forty days would have been fulfilled, and this would certainly have made it *look* like it was given as an infallibly accurate prediction. And so a good many prophecies in the Bible appear. But, in fact, they need not have anything to do with God's supposed ability to infallibly and exhaustively know the future.

Secondly, and more to the point, it is difficult to take this passage at face value while holding that God possesses EDF. If God knew with certainty all along that Nineveh was going to repent, then his prophecy through Jonah that the city would be destroyed in 40 days was simply insincere and manipulative. Not only this, but if God didn't *really* change his mind regarding the future of Nineveh, then the explicit biblical teaching that "God changed his mind about the calamity" seems misleading.

By contrast, admit that the future can to some extent be open and the text can be taken in a straightforward literal fashion.

Hezekiah's Recovery. Another interesting illustration of the Lord's prophetic decrees in the light of new freely chosen circumstances is his healing of King Hezekiah in Isaiah 38 and 2 Kings 20. Hezekiah had become seriously ill and the Lord had sent his prophet Isaiah to announce to him, under divine inspiration: "Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover" (Isa. 38: 1, cf. 2 Kg. 20: 1).

Hezekiah received this prophecy as coming from the Lord, but like the Ninevites, he did not on that account regard its message as being set in stone. To the contrary, as one who had a personal relationship with God, Hezekiah immediately set about to make his case before God. He believed he ought to be allowed to live longer (Isa. 38:2-3; 2 Kg. 20:2-3). Quite explicitly, Hezekiah set out to change God's mind.

As is often the case in Scripture, Hezekiah's prayer worked. In response to Hezekiah's prayer the Lord told Isaiah,

Turn back and say to Hezekiah prince of my people, Thus says the Lord, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; indeed, I will heal you. On the third day you shall go up to the house of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life. I will deliver you and this city out of the hand of the king of Assyria... (2 Kg. 20: 5-6; cf Isa. 38:4-5)

As a later writer rhetorically expressed it, "Did [Hezekiah] not fear the Lord and entreat the favor of the Lord, and did not the Lord change his mind about the disaster that he had pronounced 'against them?'" (Jer. 26:19).

The dilemma for the defender of EDF is this: if the Lord was perfectly certain at the outset (from all eternity!) that he was *not* going to take Hezekiah home with this illness, wasn't he being disingenuous when he told Isaiah to tell Hezekiah "you shall die...you shall not recover"? And if the Lord did not in truth change His mind, isn't the later inspired prophet being misleading in saying that the Lord *did* change his mind? Conversely, if God was being truthful in declaring his intention to take Hezekiah home, and if the later inspired prophet was not misleading us, must we not accept that God literally changed his mind on this matter?

It seems, then, that the Lord genuinely planned to end Hezekiah's life and to judge Israel. But then, in the light of Hezekiah's pleading, he genuinely decided not to end Ms life but to rather give him fifteen more years and to save Israel. I do not see that there is any way to consistently affirm this while believing at the same time that from all eternity the Lord actually planned on Hezekiah living to a ripe old age instead of dying 15 years earlier.

The Flexible Potter. The motif of God's willingness to change even after he's decreed his intention of taking a particular course of action is most explicitly and most thoroughly taught in Jeremiah 18. Here the Lord shows Jeremiah a potter's field and says:

Can I not do with you, O house of Israel, just as this potter had has done?, says the Lord. Just like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. (vss. 2-6)

For centuries ties analogy of a potter and his clay has been employed in support of an omni-determinative model of divine providence. Focusing primarily on Paul's use of this analogy in Romans 9, Calvinists in particular have concluded that God unilaterally decides all matters of human history, including who will go to heaven and who will not. Out of one lump of clay (humanity) God makes one "object of mercy" (an elect human)

which he has "prepared beforehand for glory" (heaven) while making another an "object of wrath" (a reprobate human) which is "made for destruction" (hell) (Rom. 9: 22-23).⁴

While there are many issues surrounding the exegesis of Romans 9 that we cannot now enter into, we should at least note that as the analogy is used in Jeremiah, it actually has the exact opposite connotation. Far from emphasizing the arbitrary rights or power of a potter over his material, the Lord uses this analogy to show his willingness to be flexible and change as the situation cause for it. Hence in Jeremiah 18 the Lord says,

At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, but if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will change my mind about the disaster that I intended to bring on it. And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it but if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will change my mind about the good that I had intended to do to it...Thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and your doings. (vss. 7-1 1)

The central point of the passage is that because the Lord is the potter and the potter has absolute authority over the clay, the Lord has the sovereign right to *change his mind whenever he chooses*. He thus has the right, and the willingness, to revoke a prophesied blessing or curse as the changing situation calls for it. And so, Jeremiah decrees, even though the Lord has already prophesied against Israel, she should repent of her sin, not despair and say, "It is no use!" (vs. 12).

Nothing could be farther from the Calvinist understanding of the potter/clay analogy. Indeed, it's difficult for me to reconcile the analogy as it's used in Jeremiah with the standard Arminian EDF doctrine as well. For the passage seems to teach that things are not written in stone, either in God's will (Calvinism) or *even in God's mind* (Arminianism). If God can truly change his mind, it seems that it must not be fixed from all eternity. The future must to some extent be a future of open possibilities, even after the divine potter has declared his intentions about it. Only on this supposition does it make sense for Jeremiah to encourage not to despair and take Yahweh's prophecy fatalistically, as though they couldn't change his mind. If she would simply repent and turn to God, Jeremiah tells her, God would "repent" (KJV) regarding the disaster he has foretold and will bless her instead.

The Lord later reiterates this teaching to Israel again through his prophet Jeremiah when he tells him:

Stand in the court of the Lord's house, and speak to all the cities of Judah that come to worship in the house of the LORD; speak to them all the words that I command you...It may be that they will listen... and will turn from their evil way, that I may change my mind about the disaster that I intend to bring on them because of their evil doings. (Jer. 26:2-3)

And again:

Now therefore amend your ways and your doings, and obey the voice of the Lord your God, and the Lord will change his mind about the disaster that he has pronounced against you. (Jer. 26: 13)

Jeremiah then reminds them how the Lord changed his mind in saving Hezekiah and Jerusalem at an earlier date (Jer. 26:19), the point being that if the Lord was willing to change his mind back then, he may be willing to change his mind now.

Could These Texts Be Anthropomorphic? The classical-philosophical understanding of God's foreknowledge prohibits us from taking passages such as these literally. Since it is decided at the start that God possesses EDF, passages such as the ones we've been considering must be considered to be "anthropomorphic." Texts such as these *seem* to teach that God changes his mind, all acknowledge. But in truth, the argument goes the Bible is just speaking as things appear to us and in ways that we can understand. If we speak of things as they *truly* are instead of as they appear, the argument goes, then we must affirm that God's knowledge and intentions towards Nineveh, Hezekiah and Israel have never changed.

Two things may be said against this exegetical maneuver, however. First, there is absolutely nothing in the texts themselves that suggests that they were meant to be taken anthropomorphically. I suggest that the only reason one would conclude this is because they bring to the text a philosophical presupposition that God can't literally change his mind. If this much be granted, then of course the text must be anthropomorphic. But I submit that there is no biblical reason to grant this much. To follow this methodology is to allow the interpretation of Scripture to be governed by philosophical presuppositions.

Second, none of the above texts are able to be read easily in this fashion. Anthropomorphisms are useful in graphically communicating truths that would otherwise be cumbersome or abstract for us. "The right hand of God," for example, is simply an anthropomorphic expression that refers to God's strength. Similarly, "the eyes of the

Lord" is an anthropomorphic way of referring to God's omniscience and omnipresence. Such expressions are not inaccurate: they are simply non-literal.

But how does the concept of God "changing his mind" function in this fashion? If this is an anthropomorphic expression, what is it an anthropomorphic expression of? If God in fact never changes his mind, then saying he *did* change his mind is not simply non-literal; *it is positively inaccurate*. Nor is it just this one expression we must concern ourselves with. Recall that the Lord expressly told Hezekiah he was going to die; he expressly told Nineveh they would be destroyed; he expressly told Moses and Jeremiah he was going to destroy Israel-and then he decided not to. Are we to also interpret these prophecies as anthropomorphisms? If these unfilled prophecies did not express a genuine intention on the Lord's part, how are they not simply deceptive and manipulative ploys?

Changeability As a Divine Attribute

The Virtue of Flexibility. While the notion of God changing his mind or heart strikes many contemporary Christians as strange, the concept apparently presented no problem to believers in the Bible. To the contrary, for biblical authors the Lord's ability and willingness to change His mind was seen by them as one of the Lord's praiseworthy attributes. So, for example, the prophet Joel encourages Israel to,

Return to the Lord...for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger...and relents from punishing. Who knows whether he will not turn and relent, and leave a blessing behind him... (Joel 2:13-14)

So too, in identical language (which some Old Testament scholars argue indicates that we are here dealing with an established ancient Israeli creed) Jonah reluctantly acknowledges that Yahweh is a God who was "slow to anger...and ready to relent from punishing" (Jon. 4:2). They understood that being willing and sensitive enough to adjust oneself in the fight of new situations was a positive attribute that God did not lack. When people change, God is willing to change.

Just this sort of admirable flexibility is reflected in Hosea's record of the Lord's painful inner turmoil between his righteous anger and his compassion which ultimately led him to reverse his plan to bring harsh judgment on his people (Hos. II: 8-9). If the Lord knows all that's going to occur from all eternity, this inner turmoil in time with its resulting reversal in divine plans is difficult to understand.

A similar sentiment seems to be behind the Lord's change of mind in allowing an angel of death to wreak destruction throughout Jerusalem as punishment for David's sin (2 Chr. 21:15). So too, the Lord expressed every intention of wiping out Israel because of their infidelity to him. But through the intercessory prayers of Moses, Scripture says, "the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people" (Ex. 32:14).

Note, it does not say "the Lord *appeared* to change his mind," or "the Lord took a new course of action as *though* he had changed his mind." It simply says, "the Lord changed his mind."

Though open theists are often accused with being more influenced by philosophical presuppositions than by Scripture, I would submit that if any thing, it is the classical philosophical reading of these passages that is reflecting a heavily philosophical influence. The only "crime" of which open theists can be legitimately accused is that they take Scripture literally when it gives no reason for taking it otherwise. And that is a rather strange "crime" for anyone who would claim to follow Scripture to accuse someone of.

Divine- Reversals and an Indefinite Future. It is along these same lines that we should contemplate the implications of the Lord's threat to all who contemplate abandoning their faith to "blot [their] names out of the book of life" (Rev. 3:5, cf Ex. 32:33). We are elsewhere told that the names of the faithful have been in the process of being recorded since the foundation of the world (Rev. 17:8). But despite God's desire to lose no one (2 Pet. 3:9) and despite strong commitments from the Lord to preserve all his sheep (Jn. 10), this record is apparently yet probational through this present age. Believers can, it seems, have their names blotted out of the book of life. If God possessed EDF, however, he would obviously know from all eternity who those were who would ultimately fall away. And so one has to wonder why he'd have written their names in the book in the first place.

Another interesting passage which suggests that the Lord faces an open future (and not just a future which *seems* open to us) is 2 Pet., 3:9-12. Even though Jesus taught us that the Father alone knows the day and hour (Mk., 13:32), Peter suggests that God has delayed the second coming because he is "patient with you, not wanting any to perish" (2 Pet. 3:9). Moreover, Peter then encourages believers to be "looking for and hastening (speudō) the coming of the day of God" (2 Pet. 3:12, NAS).⁵ Two points may be made regarding this passage.

First, if it can be delayed by God and speeded up by us, the time of the second coming must not be fixed—at least not from all eternity. Hence, when Jesus tells us the Father alone knows "the day and the hour, of the coming of the son of man, we should perhaps take this as an idiomatic way of saying that the decision as to when it should occur is completely the Father's, and he alone will know when the time is right. I may tell my daughter that "I know the time" when she'll be ready to drive a car. But I'm not thereby claiming that I have a pre-set date in mind. I'm rather saying that I know the criteria in her life that I'm looking for upon which my decision is based. Judging from 2 Peter, it appears that the rate of the growth of the Kingdom in the world is one important variable which the Father considers in deciding when to bring to a close this age. But when this criteria shall be met seems somewhat open to our influence.

Secondly, it seems difficult, if not impossible, to take seriously the teaching that the second coming can really be delayed or speeded up depending somewhat on what we do if we also hold that God possesses EDF. If God possesses EDF, then he would possess an

unalterable knowledge of exactly when the second coming would take place. But in this case it hardly makes sense to say that God delayed it or that we should try to speed it up.

The God Who Moves With Us in Time

The Disappointed God. There are many other ways in which the Bible portrays God as facing an open future. Hear the frustration of the Lord, for example, as he expresses his amazement at the stubbornness of Israel:

The Lord said to me in the days of King Josiah: Have you seen what she [Israel] did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore there? And I thought, "After she has done all this she will return to me"; but she did not return... (Jer. 3:6-7, emphasis added)

And again:

I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I thought you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel. (3:19-20, emphasis added)

The obvious question that cries out for an answer is this: if the Lord has eternally foreknown in exhaustive detail every event that shall ever transpire, how is it possible that the Lord is speaking forthrightly in this passage? How could the Lord *genuinely think* that Israel would do one thing if in fact he eternally foreknew that Israel would not do this? Nor can this passage possibly be explained away as an anthropomorphism, for the passage has nothing to do with how things appeared; it is the Lord telling us something about his subjective state. This self-revealing expression of disappointment from the Lord, I hold, can only be accepted as authentic if we understand that the future is partly a realm of possibilities and probabilities, not settled certainties.

On this view, the Lord can be heard as expressing his surprise at the improbable happening. He *genuinely thought* his people would behave differently. If EDF is true, however, then there are no real possibilities or probabilities for God, for all is eternally certain. And this means that there never can be a situation where the Lord thinks one thing will most likely occur while it turns out that something else occurred. Unfortunately

from the EDF perspective, however, just this is what the Lord explicitly tells us happened in Jeremiah 3:6-7 and 19-20.⁶

The way the Bible speaks often reflects the openness of the future, which the Lord faces. In seeing the incredible wickedness of antediluvian humanity, for example, the Bible says "the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart" (Gen. 6:6). But how could the Lord possibly have regretted something he created if he was perfectly certain what would happen an eternity before he created it? Again, if someone wants to dismiss this expression as "anthropomorphic" then we must inquire, "What is this an anthropomorphic expression of?" If we insist that the Lord didn't *really* regret making humans, what does the expression that tells us he *did* regret making humans truthfully communicate to us? If the Lord eternally knows the outcome of everything he embarks on and thus can't regret doing anything, isn't this entire passage (and all those that are like it) simply deceptive?

In a similar way, after king Saul chose a rebellious course of action that brought him to a despicable state of wickedness, the Lord told Samuel, "I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me..." (I Sam. 15:12). And the author adds at the end of his narrative,

"And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel" (I Sam. 15:35). The only perspective that allows for these texts to communicate their apparent meaning is one that holds that Saul's fate was not an eternally foregone conclusion, either in the mind or in the will of God. The Lord could only regret how things turned out if he genuinely hoped for a different outcome that didn't transpire. And this entails that the Lord didn't have an exhaustively definite foreknowledge that Saul's kingship wouldn't work out before he made him king.

The Lord of the Present. Another episode with Saul reveals the openness of the future God faces and touches once again upon the tricky nature of what looks like prophetic foreknowledge. In I Samuel 23 we find young David fleeing for his life from King Saul to the town of Keilah. Hearing rumors that Saul might besiege the town in his attempt to get him, David inquired of the Lord.

O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has heard that Saul seeks to come to Keilah, to destroy the city on my account. And now, will Saul come down as your servant has heard?... The Lord said, "He will come down." Then David said, "Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" The Lord said, "They will surrender you". (I Sam. 23:10-12)

So far the narrative could be read as a perfect example of how the Lord can see into the future. Interestingly enough however, *none of this comes to pass*. Saul did not come

down, and David was not handed over. For on the basis of the information the Lord gave David, he and his men immediately left Keliath. Hence, what the Lord said would happen now *couldn't* happen.

We are here confronted with another example of the Lord of history sharing with his servant insights into what will take place *if* things don't change. *Knowing the present perfectly*, the Lord knew Saul's heart and the dispositions of the people of Keliath and thus could accurately predict how they would behave *if David stayed put*. But this prediction obviously wasn't a piece of foreknowledge, for what the Lord predicted did not come to pass.⁷

Scripture everywhere portrays God's knowledge as conditioned by the way things really are (for his knowledge is accurate): and part of the way things really are is temporally conditioned. Plato and much of Greek philosophy after him held that time was somewhat illusory, as we have seen. Through Augustine (primarily) this conviction became a staple of the classical-philosophical tradition. But Scripture never expresses this sentiment. Hence, Scripture portrays God's knowledge as conditioned by the past, present, and future.

A good example of this is found in the narrative regarding Abraham's offering up of Isaac. The Lord put Abraham to the test to discern whether or not he was a faithful covenant partner with him. So he commanded Abraham to offer up his only son Isaac. Abraham obeyed the Lord only to have the Lord stop him at the last moment and spare Isaac. Then the Lord told Abraham, "...*now I know* that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son..." (Gen. 22:12, emphasis added).

If we take this narrative at face value and do not reinterpret it so as to protect a philosophical presupposition, the narrative suggests that God did not know for certain that Abraham would remain faithful to him until he passed the test God gave him. If we rather insist that God knew this all along, the expression "now I know" becomes disingenuous; the phrase, "since you have not withheld your son" which forms the basis of God's new knowledge becomes disingenuous; and the whole test becomes a charade. Only if we resist the pervasive influence of Plato and concede that the ontological status of the future is in part "possibly this and possibly that" rather than "definitely this and definitely not that," only then can the narrative be accepted at face value.

A similar example of God's knowledge being temporally conditioned is found in Ezekiel 22. Here the Lord is declaring his disappointment and righteous indignation with Israel. In a classic passage that perhaps drives home the urgency of prayer more emphatically than any other text in the Bible, the Lord says of his people:

The people have oppressed the poor and needy, and have extorted from the alien without redress. And I sought for anyone among them who would repair the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land, so that I

would not destroy it; but I found no one. Therefore I have poured out my indignation upon them... (vss. 29-3 1a)

If we take this passage at face value, it certainly seems that the fate of Israel hung in the balance on whether or not the Lord could find anyone to "stand in the breach" before him, such as Moses had done for Israel centuries earlier (Ex. 32:14). Unfortunately, this time there was no Moses to be found to intercede and alter God's declared intention.

What most interests us about this passage presently is that the genuineness of the Lord's declared search for a person to stand in the breach seems compromised if in fact God knew all along indeed, from all eternity that no one would be found. The passage means little, I submit, unless the Lord *genuinely hoped* he could raise up someone and unless the Lord *genuinely tried* to raise up someone to intercede on Israel's behalf. And it means little unless the Lord was *genuinely frustrated* in the unavailability of any interceding prophet. If this much at least is not true, then it seems to me that the passage simply misrepresents God.

For God's hope and frustration to be genuine, however, the question of whether or not someone would stand in the breach had to be an open issue when God began his search for such a person. In other words, the future must to some extent be open and known by God as such.

The Omniresourceful God

The God Who Say's "If" and "Perhaps". The fact that the Lord often speaks; in future conditionals throughout the Bible also seems to suggest that he faces a future that is at least in part composed of indefinite possibilities instead of definite realities. Consider, for example, the inspired prophecy given to Zedekiah as he was contemplating whether or not to obey the Lord and surrender or rather to try to save face and fight the Babylonians:

Thus says the Lord, the God of hosts, the God of Israel, If you will only surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then your life shall be spared, and this city shall not be burned with fire, and you and your house shall live. But if you do not surrender to the officials of the king of Babylon, then this city shall be handed over to the Chaldeans, and they shall bum it with fire, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand obey the voice of the Lord in what I say to you, and it shall go well with you...But if you are determind not to surrender, this is what the Lord has shown me All your wives and your children shall be led out to the Chaldeans, and you yourself shall not escape from their hand... (Jer. 38:17-18,

20-21, 23, emphasis added)

What is most fascinating about this passage is that the Lord reveals to his prophet the outcome of *two possible courses of action* Zedekiah could take. The omniscient Lord of history is in a position to know all the variables, and so he can perfectly anticipate what will happen if Zedekiah does and does not surrender. But, if we take the passage at face value, it seems equally clear that at the time of the prophecy the direction Zedekiah would go was not yet determined.

Examples of divine speech reflecting an as-yet undetermined future abound in Scripture. One more example must suffice. In Exodus 3 the Lord calls Moses and commissions him to go and tell the elders of Israel that the Lord has heard their prayers and now intends to deliver them out of Egypt (7-17). He assures the very insecure Moses, "They will listen to your voice..." (vs. 18). Moses clearly does not interpret God's statements as exhaustive previews into the future, however, for he quickly asks, "suppose they do not believe me or listen to me...?" (4:1).

The Lord here does not inform Moses that he has an infallible perspective into the future, as one might expect if God indeed possessed EDF. He rather shows Moses how he can turn a staff into a serpent and then back into a staff again (vss. 2-4). This miracle, the Lord tells him, is "so that they may believe that the Lord, the God of their ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to you" (vs.5).

Moses apparently isn't convinced this miracle will suffice, however, for the Lord immediately adds a second miracle: He shows Moses how he can make a whole hand leprous and then whole again (vs. 7). Then the Lord adds, "*If they will not believe you or heed the first sign, they may believe the second sign*" (vs. 8, emphasis added). But the Lord quickly acknowledges the possibility that even this second miracle might not suffice. And so he continues:

If they will not believe even these two signs or heed you, you shall take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground; and the water that you shall take from the Nile will become blood on the dry ground. (vs. 9)

If we simply refrain from imposing on this narrative a philosophical presupposition regarding the supposedly fixed content of the future, it seems clear that the Lord is not sure just how many miracles it may take to get the elders of Israel on board with his program. Conversely, if the Lord has for an eternity been perfectly certain it would take exactly three, then he seems to be quite disingenuous in telling Moses they *may* believe the first and they may believe the second miracles (vss. 5. 8). He would know perfectly well they wouldn't believe these two miracles.

This lack of certainty regarding the future is no defect on God's part however. It's just that the only reality there is for God or anyone to know is that the elders may believe after one, or two, or perhaps three miracles. *That* is what is real, and so that is what God knows as real. Until the elders resolve the issue by responding to Moses' miracles, there's nothing over and above possibilities that exist, and so there's nothing over and above possibilities for God to know.

Thus, we can no more fault God for not knowing for certain what will happen than we can fault God for not knowing that there is (say) eleven chairs in the room when in fact there is only ten. So too, in this passage God doesn't know exactly how the elders shall freely respond to Moses because the free behavior of the elders hasn't taken place yet.

What is also clear, however, is that the Lord is confident he can *somehow* get the elders of Israel to believe and thus get the children of Israel out of Egypt. He is an omni-resourceful God who can creatively and ingeniously work around any situation. Like a master chess player, he may not know exactly what moves his opponents will make-for he is playing persons, not a preprogrammed computer. And so he may not know exactly how many moves he will have to make, or what moves he will have to make, or even what players he might have to sacrifice in order to checkmate his opponent. But being the supreme chess player he knows the game so well, and his novice opponents so well, that he can guarantee victory.⁸

He is omni-resourceful in accomplishing his ends. And to many of us this is a far more laudable attribute than the supposition that God has to possess "inside information" or control everything in order to achieve his ends.

Conclusion: Risk and the Open Future

On my reading, therefore, the God of the Bible simply is not a God who has a secret crystal ball he gazes into. An open possibility doesn't cease to be an open possibility simply because it is God who knows it, anymore than anything else ceases to be what it is because it is God who knows it. God knows reality as it really is and not otherwise, precisely because his knowledge is perfect. So God knows the future *precisely as it is*. And what we are seeing is that the Bible gives us every reason to suppose that what the future is to us it also is to God: it is, to some extent at least, a realm of possibilities.

In this light it makes perfect sense to speak of God taking risks in creating a world that is capable of love. While we are told in Scripture that the overall objectives of history are secure-the Lord shall certainly have a bride who will participate in his triune love-the fate of any one of his free creatures is necessarily insecure until that person chooses to enter into the saving covenant with God.⁹ This is the risk the Lord takes in creating a world like this.

If significant numbers of free agents (angels and humans) opt to rebel against him, and/or if crucially important, high ranking, morally responsible agents (such as Lucifer) decide to rebel against him, then the result will be a cosmos caught up in warfare. This is

precisely what Scripture depicts as having occurred (cf. ch. I). We may believe on the basis of Scripture that God genuinely hoped this would not occur. And we may believe on the basis of Scripture that God is genuinely grieved by the fact that it did occur. But we may also be confident, again on the basis of Scripture that God knew of these possibilities and yet deemed the risk worth it. For the alternative is to have either no creation at all, or, what comes to almost the same thing, have a creation that was incapable of love.

Finally, on the basis of Scripture, we may be confident that the war shall come to an end and, whatever losses were suffered in the process, the Lord shall then reign victorious over his creation. His objective of acquiring a bride who reflects and participates in his unsurpassable triune love will then have been attained. As we saw above, we are all called to work and pray so as to speed up this victory.

The open view thus renders intelligible both the general control and the genuine openness, which the Bible ascribes to God when speaking about his relationship with history. I suspect it is the only view that does this with logical consistency.

¹⁾I have omitted almost all footnotes because they seemed inappropriate given the format of our discussion on the 13th of May and because many of them were yet incomplete.

²⁾ I employ a version of the epistemic argument to make this point in my *Trinity and Process: A Critical Evaluation of Hartshorne's Di-Polar Theism Towards a Trinitarian Metaphysic* (Lang, 1992)

³⁾ It is crucial that we specify that the possibilities in question are ontological, and not just epistemological. Those who affirm EDF may yet hold that the future consists of a realm of possibilities. But the indefiniteness of these possibilities, they must admit, is merely epistemological. It is due to our limited frame of reference. For God there are no genuine "maybe's."

⁴⁾ Perhaps the most thorough comprehensive defense of this reading of Paul is John Piper's *The Justification of God*.

⁵⁾ The NIV has "as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming."

⁶⁾ Passages such as this need not imply that God was caught off guard as it were, as though he didn't anticipate the possibility of the improbable. Nor do they imply that God

was mistaken in thinking people would do one thing when it turns out they do another. If God knows the whole of reality exhaustively, he eternally knows all future possibilities with their various probabilities, for these are objective realities from all eternity. From all eternity, for example, it was logically possible that God would create a world such that just the situation described in this passage would transpire. God would, then, eternally know this. And from all eternity it was logically possible (and indeed most probable) that in this situation his people would respond positively to the Lord's leading. But it was from all eternity also logically possible (though relatively impossible) that in this exact same situation his people would not respond positively. The Lord, having perfectly accurate assessment of all probabilities, *thought* his people would so the former when this situation came about. But many of his people, being self-determining free creatures, opted for the more improbable course of action. Hence the Lord's surprise in this passage. Still, he was not caught off guard. Nor was he mistaken in his original expectation that his behavior would most likely cause his people to follow him.

7) If, however, David had stayed in Keliath and been captured, however, the Lord's statements in this passage would certainly have looked like another confirmation example of EDF. So it is, I contend, with many fulfilled prophecies in Scripture.

8) In subsequent chapters I develop this into a general understanding of divine providence and answer the question of how it is that some things can be predestined about the future when others things are left open.

9) In chapter two I addressed the objection that affirming self-determining freedom implies a pelagian soteriology. I there argued that all that is needed to affirm self-determination while also affirming salvation by grace through faith alone is the denial that God's grace works irresistible. God's grace is the necessary but not the sufficient condition for salvation.

This paper was originally published on the Internet at the Baptist General Conference Web site.