

The "Open" View of the Future

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Preliminary Considerations

1. All Bible Believers Hold that God IS Omniscient.

*God sees everything in creation simultaneously (Job 28:24; Ps. 33:13-15).

* God knows the number of the stars and angels (Ps. 147:4; Isa. 40:26) and hairs on your head (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; Jere. 16:17; 17:9-10; Lk. 16:15; Acts 1:24; Rom. 8:27; 1 Cor. 4:5; 1 Jn. 3:19-20).

2. What The Issue About the "Open Future" Is and Is Not About

It 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 a "*certainly* this and *certainly not* that."

* The view does not qualify God's omniscience. The "Chairs in a Room" analogy

3. The Exegetical Methodology

* Many passages teach or imply that the future is determined and/or foreknown.

* Many passages teach or imply that the future is undetermined and not foreknown.

The Traditional Approach: Affirm the obvious meaning of the first set of passages but denies the obvious meaning of the second (they are figurative/anthropomorphic. etc.).

The Alternative Approach: Affirm the obvious meaning of both sets of passages. Some of the future is determined and foreknown, some is not.

The Bible and the Open View

I. God Changes His Mind

The Ninevites Change God's Mind

John. 3:10: "*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.*"

Hezekiah's Prayer Changes God's Mind

God prophecies to Hezekiah through Isaiah: "*Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover*" (Isa. 38: 1, cf. 2 K. 20: 1). Hezekiah earnestly prays for God to spare him. The Lord responds:

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. 33:4-5)

Jeremiah later encourages the Israelites not to be fatalistic by recalling the ordeal:

"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?" (Jere. 26:19).

God's Flexible Policy About Prophecy

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. (Jere. 18: 7-11).

* Note the "potter/clay" analogy of divine sovereignty (Jere. 18: 1-6). The potter is so sovereign he has the right to change his mind if chooses to!

* Note, the error the Israelites were making was in concluding that since God had prophesied against them, "*It is no use!*" (vs.12).

Stand in the court of the Lords 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 (Jere. 26:2-3).

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 (Jere. 26:13).

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, cf. Jon. 4:2).

Moses' Prayer Changes God's Mind

The Lord had planned on destroying Israel, but after Moses prayer "*the Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned to bring on his people.*" (Ex. 32:14).

Warning to Backsliders

God threatens to "*blot [their] name out of the book of life*" (Rev. 3:5, cf. Ex. 32:33).

Question: How can the orthodoxy of saying that God truly "changes his mind" be questionable when one is simply *quoting the Bible verbatim* in doing so.

II. Other Evidences of a Partly Open Future

A Destruction That Wasn't Called Off

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...(Ezek. 22: 29-3 Ia.)

The Openness of the Second Coming

Peter suggests that God has delayed the Second Coming because he is "*patient with you, not wanting any to perish*" (2 Pet. 3:9). Peter then encourages believers to be "*looking for and hastening (pseudo) the coming of the day of god*" (2 Pet. 3:12, NIV "speed its coming").

God's Disappointment

Yahweh 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...(Jere. 3:6-7).

And again:

I thought how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant and, 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. (Jere. 3:19-20)

God Sometimes Thinks In Terms of Possibilities

Now it came about when pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by the way of the land of the Philistines, even though it was near, for God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and they return to Egypt." (NIV: "if they face war they might change their minds and return to Egypt.") (Exodus 13:17)

Exodus 3:18- 4:9

In Exodus 3 the Lord assures Moses, "*They [the elders] will listen to your voice...*" (vs. 18). Moses (clearly not interpreting Yahweh's statements as unalterable previews into the future) quickly asks, "*suppose they do not believe me or listen to me...?*" (4:1). The Lord performs the miracle of turning his staff into a snake (vss. 2-4) "*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 isn't convinced this miracle will suffice, so the Lord 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. But 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. 8-9).

God Finds Things Out

After Abraham's passing his test: "*...now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son...*"(Gen. 22:12).

God Regrets Certain Outcomes.

After Saul's failure as king the Lord confesses: "*I regret that I made Saul king, for he has turned back from following me...*" (I Sam. 15: 11). 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).

So too, just prior to the flood: "*The Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.*" (Gen. 6:6).

God Gives Alternatives

To King Zedekiah:

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 burn 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 determined 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...(Jere. 38:17-18, 20-21, 23).

Conclusion: While much of the future is settled, some of the future is not. God perfectly knows it as such.

III. Responding to Objections

Couldn't These Passages Be "Phenomenological Anthropomorphisms"?

- * Nothing in the texts suggests this. They read as literal reports.
- * What are they anthropomorphic expressions of? If God doesn't *really* change his mind, aren't all the verses which explicitly say he does change his mind simply misleading?
- * If God doesn't *really* change his minds, aren't the prophecies he revokes disingenuous?
- * How can reports about what God *was thinking* (Jere. 3:6-7, 19-20; Ex. 13:17) be phenomenological?
- * At the very least, can one's orthodoxy be impugned for taking such verses literally?

What About Passages Which Strongly Affirm Divine Foreknowledge?

The former things I declare 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 them..."(Isa. 48:3-5)

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: To demonstrate that the one true God is Lord of history, not some dead idol.

*What These Verses **Don't** Say:* Everything about the future is definite and is known as such.

What They Do Say: Whatever Yahweh (as opposed to dead idols) decides to do in history he can most certainly carry out. "*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). "My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention I have planned, and I will do it" (Isa. 46: 10,).*

Doesn't God predestine and thus foreknow free decisions, even wicked deeds (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28)?

- * Whatever difficulties these verses have for the Open View they have for all Arminians.
- * God can override freedom or solidify character whenever he chooses (e.g., "hardening hearts"). He just doesn't do this *all the time*.
- * Acts 2:23 and 4:27-28 teaches that *the event* of Christ's crucifixion was predestined and foreknown, *not who would carry it out*.

Doesn't This View Imply That God is Not In Control?

*The "Choose Your Own Adventure" Model of Providence
The Interplay of Openness and Determinateness in all of reality.*

- * Quantum Indeterminacy and Phenomenological Wholes
- * Chaos theory: reality is structured but meticulously unpredictable
- * The behavior of insects and animals
- * Human behavior

What About Biblical Prophecies?

Many (if not most) are conditional.

- * "*Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jon.3:4b).*

* "Set your house in order, for you shall die, you shall not recover" (Isa. 38:1, cf. 2 Kg. 20:1).

* Jere. 18: 6-10: If you change. I'll change...

* David to Yahweh:

O Lord, the God of Israel, your servant has heard that Saul seeks to come to Keliiah, 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 Keliiah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" The Lord said, "They will surrender you, Then David and his men... set out and left Keliiah." (I Sam. 23:10-12).

Other Prophecies Concern What God Insures Will Transpire.

* Messianic Prophecies

* Destruction of Cities (?)

* Exceptional details in history (e.g. Peter's threefold denial, Jn. 20:25-27, cf. his later threefold affirmation of love, Jn. 21:15-17) and his death (Jn.21:18)

Other Prophecies Are Based On Inevitable or Likely Consequences of The Present (I Sam. 23:10-12; Jere. 38:17-18, 20-21, 23)

What about the Bible's teaching that God does not change his mind?

I Sam. 15:29 "...the glory of Israel will not lie or change his mind, for this not a man that He should change his mind.

* Affirming this passage as literal at the expense of literalness of the 39 passages that teach that God *does* change his mind is arbitrary.

* There is no problem in affirming that *sometimes* God is willing to change his mind (as in Jere. 18:7-11) and *sometimes* not (as in response to Saul's pleading in I Sam. 15:27).

* God *never* changes his mind in the way humans often change their minds -- e.g., deceitfully, arbitrarily, etc. "God is not a man that He should change His mind."

Doesn't This View Demean God's Sovereignty?

* The Bible *exalts* God's openness to change as part of his sovereignty (Joel 2:13-14; Jon. 4:2; Jere. 18:7-11).

* Primary models of God in Scripture are responsive (shepherd, husband, compassionate king, hen)

* The Interpersonal/Responsive model is more, not less, sovereign. Analogy of a master at chess.

Doesn't Psalms 139 teach that God foreknows all the days of our life?

Psalms 139:16 "*Your eyes be held my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed.*"

* Poetry calls for hermeneutical caution.

* The Hebrew is very ambiguous. It lacks "all my days". What exactly is "written" is uncertain. (NKJV supplies "members").

* Supplying "members" instead of "days" fits the motif of the passage best since the whole verse concerns the growing fetus in the womb.

* Implications of *yasar* ("formed," "planned," "ordained") are uncertain. The phrase need not entail inalterability.

* Even on the NRSV and NIV reading, the verse doesn't say "*all my days* were written" but "*all the days that were formed...*"

Doesn't Romans 9, teach that God controls the salvation and damnation of each individual?

Rom. 9:18: "*So then God has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom desires.*"

* Whatever problems this passages poses for the Open View, it poses for all Arminians.

* The passage must be read in the context of the New Testaments teaching about the need and responsibility to choose to believe and God's desire to save all (Jn. 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:4; 4: 10; 2 Pet. 3:9)

* No one interpreted this passage in a Calvinistic fashion until Augustine.

* The passage isn't about the salvation or damnation of individuals but about God's fidelity to Israel and his right to define who is the true Israel (cf 9:6, 11:1). (Note: God blesses Ishmael and Esau, though they are excluded from God's chosen lineage).

* The potter/clay analogy doesn't entail absolute determinism (cf. Jere. 18). Nor is the clay "primordial humanity."

* Paul sums up his line of argumentation in this passage in vss 30-32 ("what shall we say then...") by stating that Israel has temporarily stumbled *Because they did not pursue*

[righteousness] by faith, but as though it were by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone... In short; Paul appeals to their free will.

The Open View of the Future is Untraditional and "Socinian" It should thus be rejected by orthodox Believers.

* Socinius denied the Trinity, Deity of Christ and the atonement. Calling the Open View "Socinian" is like calling Calvinists "Muslim" because the Koran teaches absolute predestination! **(The view would perhaps better be called "M'Cabian" or "Clarkian" after two of the most prominent orthodox promoters of this view in the 19th century, the Methodist professor L.D. M'Cabe and the great biblical commentator Adam Clarke).**

* There is a long standing philosophical debate regarding the content of God's omniscience in the Church tradition in which new views have been accepted with some frequency.

* The "open" issue was discussed among 19th century Methodists, but never as an orthodox/heresy issue. Others in Church history have qualified the content of God's omniscience more radically than the Open View (e.g. St. Jerome) and have not been judged as unorthodox.

* Luther, Calvin, the Anabaptists and other Reformers all taught things which were very untraditional at the time but which we Protestants now follow as true. Many of us also follow some of the insights of modern day Pentecostalism, though the use of the "*charismata*" was dormant throughout most of church history. We do this because for Protestants *Scripture alone is the final court of appeal*. Any other line of reasoning is anti-Protestant.

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