

Does God Know the Future?
A Comparison of Open Theism and the Bible

Keith Wrasmann
2014

Open theism denies divine foreknowledge: “The future is partly settled and partly unsettled, partly determined and partly undetermined and, therefore, partly unknown even to God.”¹ Although similar to other free will theists such as the Eastern Orthodox and the Arminians, a main difference is open theism’s position that God does not have exhaustive definite foreknowledge of future contingent events: God does not know everything that will happen in the future because it has not happened yet, and therefore it is not knowable, because God only knows what is knowable.² It is not possible for God to have complete and exhaustive knowledge of the entire future.³ It must be stated that this is not an issue of God’s omniscience (that he is all-knowing), but of his foreknowledge, as open theism affirms the former.⁴ The argument is not related to differing definitions of omniscience, but to different understandings of the reality which God infallibly knows.⁵

Does God have exhaustive foreknowledge, or does he not? The answer must come from his word revelation, the Bible, more so than from experience, tradition or reason alone, although these are important.⁶ As this is an issue of God’s foreknowledge, the focus here will be to compare open theism’s position and the Bible. Open theism has made the claim, and the Bible must unequivocally verify it. As one critic has pointedly argued, “How could the Fathers of the Church and other classical Christian thinkers have gone so wrong with regard to the concept of God? And how is it that the [proponents of open theism] managed to succeed where their classical predecessors, many saints among them, failed?”⁷ Although long-standing tradition does not necessarily equal truth of doctrine, indeed their claims are bold in the context of the last 2,000 years of Christian thought. An examination of key scriptures in the open theism debate

¹ Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001), 13.

² Bruce A. Ware, ed., *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008), 199-202.

³ William Hasker, “An Adequate God,” in John B. Cobb, Jr., and Clark H. Pinnock, eds., *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 218.

⁴ Bruce A. Ware, ed., *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*, 199-202.

⁵ Thomas Belt, “Open Theism and the Assemblies of God: A Personal Account of My Views on Open Theism,” Open Theism Information Site, <http://www.opentheism.info/pages/information> (accessed November 26, 2009), 5.

⁶ For an endorsement of open theism from these four perspectives, see Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness*.

⁷ Alfred J. Freddoso, “The ‘Openness’ of God: A Reply to William Hasker,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 28 (1998), 127.

will show what kind of foreknowledge the God of the Bible has, and if open theism's claim holds water.

Open theism claims there is scriptural evidence that leads to the conclusion God does not have foreknowledge. Specifically, the Bible shows that God's repentance is part of his learning experience thus suggesting an apparent lack of foreknowledge. It is argued that if God already knows what is going to happen, then why does he change his mind about things, at times with regret or as if with an element of surprise?⁸ God learns as he goes along, as Richard Rice explains:

As an aspect of his experience, God's knowledge of the world is also dynamic rather than static. Instead of perceiving the entire course of human existence in one timeless moment, God comes to know events as they take place. He learns something from what transpires. We call this position the "open view of God" because it regards God as receptive to new experiences and as flexible in the way he works toward his objectives in the world.⁹

Open theism denies God's foreknowledge in presenting him as one who learns as he goes along with the unfolding events and choices of his creation. It would not be entirely wrong to say there are biblical passages that appear to show that God "comes to know events as they take place," and in that sense he appears to be "receptive to new experiences," but to deal with these passages by necessarily concluding God does not have foreknowledge (while leaving out of the equation others that show he does have foreknowledge) is irresponsible. It is as rational as a person watching a baseball game who later only reports that the pitcher threw fastballs; because he only saw him throw fastballs that day he concluded the pitcher *could not* throw any other pitch. In truth, the pitcher was able to throw curve balls also but he just did not that day. What if God accessed his exhaustive foreknowledge after his decision to create this world but before its actual creation? Would he not at that time see the unfolding of the events of the future, learn new things about his creation, and thus be receptive to the path it takes because of the free will he gave it, and in planning certain events such as Christ's redemptive work (1 Pet 1:20)? Of course he would, as Jack Cottrell is apt to "think of God's foreknowledge as registering in his mind progressively or incrementally, with the future of the intended universe unfolding in his

⁸ Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 26-35.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

consciousness in accord with its sure historical sequence,”¹⁰ and “Once God has made his decision to create this universe, he has complete and infallible knowledge of its future.”¹¹ The fact that God at some point learned from his creation is undeniable; *when* he learned/learns is a dividing issue. Regardless, it cannot be definitely concluded that God does not have foreknowledge simply because there are biblical passages that show him experiencing in ways that appear to preclude foreknowledge; the biblical text bears this out.

The account of God deciding to destroy the earth with a flood is an arrow in the quiver of the open theist. God “saw how great” man’s sin had become, was “grieved that he had made man,” and with this grief his heart was “filled with pain”; he thus declared his grief over making man, and his plan to “wipe mankind...from the face of the earth” (Gen 6:5-7). It appears plan A had failed and it was now time for plan B—in a sense starting the human race over from someone who was righteous. If anyone would say God was not affected by his creation, he is denying what the scripture plainly says. God was affected by his creation and decided to take action because of it. It is clear from this account that God became grieved over what his free will creatures did. But for the open theist, this experience of being affected leading to repentance on God’s part indicates a learning experience and, further, a lack of his foreknowledge. But just because God in this passage is grieved in relation to the events of his creation, or “learns” something for that matter, still does not mean he does not have foreknowledge. What open theism does is looks at certain biblical data and, because it does not know what to do with passages that show God relating with his creation in real time experience, concludes that God must not have foreknowledge if he is acting like he does (learning, grieving, regretting, and on).

An explanation how God can be “grieved that he had made man” in response to seeing the totality of the world’s sin while at the same time still having exhaustive foreknowledge is although he had foreknowledge of this event and all that led to it, he was unwilling to step in and act on that foreknowledge along the way in order to change the future that he saw coming. This would be a logical impossibility,¹² and a violation of the terms of his creation of free will creatures. In other words, God’s *modus operandi* is not to use his foreknowledge to change the

¹⁰ Jack Cottrell, “Understanding God: God and Time,” Cincinnati Bible Seminary, <https://moodle.ccuniversity.edu/mod/resource/view.php?id=29131> (accessed September 21, 2010), 19.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, 149. It is logically impossible to foresee a future that has been erased by intervention because that original future would never be there to be foreseen.

futures he has seen on a continually running basis. He is not willing to violate the terms of his free will creation. The fact that God is unwilling to act on his foreknowledge in every instance to change some aspect of the future shows that something else is behind these passages, something that governs (self-imposed, of course) his real time involvement and response in the world he created—God has a real experience with his creation regardless of his foreknowledge; it also shows why he would experience emotions as the events unfold. God is more interested in experiencing the unfolding of his creation in reality than controlling or micromanaging every event in creation based on his foreknowledge; he puts plans in place through his foreknowledge to guide his good purposes but then allows himself true interaction with the unfolding of events; he is interested in working out things by his power toward his purposes as they unfold in a free will universe, even when they go other than he would desire—such as making the radical decision to wipe mankind from the face of the earth and start over. It is how God uses or does not use his foreknowledge, as well as his ability to experience his creation regardless of his foreknowledge, that has open theists declaring he has none! It is an irrational conclusion to see God respond to and interact with his creation and then insist he is not able to have foreknowledge.

Other examples of key scriptures open theism uses to try to connect God's actions with a lack of foreknowledge include:

- 1 Samuel 15:35: God is sorry: “And the LORD was grieved that he had made Saul king over Israel.”
- Genesis 18:22-33: God's initial intentions can change: God would have relented from destroying Sodom as he intended because of Moses' comments if the new conditions Moses suggested would have been met.
- Genesis 22:12: God learns that Abraham fears him: “Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”
- Exodus 32:9-14: God changes his mind about destroying Israel because of Moses' plea: “Then the LORD relented and did not bring on his people the disaster he had threatened.”
- Jeremiah 3:7, 19: God wrongly thought Israel would return to him and love him: “I thought that after she had done all this she would return to me but she did not”; “I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me.”

- Jeremiah 32:35: It did not enter God’s mind that Israel would sin like they did: “They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molech, though I never commanded, nor did it enter my mind, that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.”

It is in light of such scriptural evidence that Clark Pinnock argues

Why, unless the future was somewhat unsettled, would God be said to regret things that happen when they happened? Why, unless the future was somewhat open, would God be pictured as delighted and/or surprised by something? Why, unless the future was somewhat open, would God test people to discover things about them? Why, unless the future was somewhat open, would God speak of the future in conditional terms? How, unless the future was somewhat open, could God be said to change his mind? Many considerations point in the same direction. The future is not entirely settled.¹³

It is therefore concluded the future is “partly unknown even to God,”¹⁴ and “Thus, God does not foreknow every future choice or the outcome of every human decision.”¹⁵ Although there is a hint of truth in some regard to this line of reasoning,¹⁶ in reality, none of these scriptures suggests that God is logically incapable of having exhaustive foreknowledge; neither does any specifically state it. Of course one could interpret it as such, as open theists have, but it proves irresponsible. It would be pointless to go point by point with the scriptures listed above to try and prove that God really did not experience what the passages clearly show or that they were really saying something other than what they plainly say.¹⁷ It is the conclusions drawn from this information that are important—and open theism has concluded wrongly. At most, these scriptures together indicate that God’s providence is such that he does not always allow his foreknowledge to color, water down or spoil his experience in every instance of his governance of the world. In this way, the future could be said to be partly open or unsettled, but only under the umbrella of God’s foreknowledge, as shown when God is willing to let Abraham talk him

¹³ Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God’s Openness*, 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁵ Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, 124.

¹⁶ By this I mean there is a part of this argument that appears to describe accurately how God is operating—mainly that a God who can have foreknowledge in every instance but allows himself to experience his creation, not letting his foreknowledge determine it or color, water down or spoil his experience with his free will creation thus constitutes a universe that has possibility, and would be “open” in that sense as it develops.

¹⁷ For an attempt to refute open theism’s interpretation of some of these passages, see Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003), 29-35. However, Ware’s attempt to deal with Genesis 18:22-23, 22:12, and 1 Samuel 15:35 is unsatisfying in how he explains away how one would plainly observe God in these texts.

down in the numbers of potential righteous persons needed to cause God to relent in the Sodom account. To imagine God interacting with his creation and operating without his foreknowledge constantly coloring his experience in every single instance does not constitute an inability for him to have it, or use it if and when he wants; as said earlier, no one would say that because a baseball pitcher does not throw a curve ball in a certain game means he is therefore logically incapable of throwing that pitch; but this is precisely what open theism has done. This conclusion is even more pronounced in light of the Bible's teaching on foreknowledge. We will now consider some scriptures that point to the foreknowledge of God before we examine the implications and conclude.

Scripture is more than clear that God has foreknowledge. Acts 2:23 says Jesus "was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge." If God did not have foreknowledge, the Bible would not plainly say Jesus was handed over to be put to death by "God's...foreknowledge." Jesus' death was a result of God's foreknowledge of what his creation would need in a savior. Cottrell remarks even of the details of God's foreknowledge in this case: "the details of *how* this would be accomplished were planned in relation to God's foreknowledge of the historical situation and of the character and choices of men such as Judas."¹⁸ In speaking of the redemptive work of Christ, the Bible also says Jesus was "chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake" (1 Pet 1:20), plainly affirming that before the creation of the world God chose Jesus to die based on his foreknowledge. These two passages should in and of themselves be enough to settle the whole argument as to whether God has foreknowledge. It is important to note here that there is no scripture in the Bible that says God does not have foreknowledge, but we just examined one that says he does.

Yet another scripture refers to God's foreknowledge. In speaking of God's elect, the Bible says they "have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood" (1 Pet 1:2). Again, it cannot be made any clearer: the Bible refers to "the foreknowledge of God," and that he even uses his "foreknowledge" for his specific purposes. At this point one wonders how open theism can deny that God has foreknowledge when the Bible clearly declares it. What open theism really sees in the Bible is a God whose experience with his creation is not

¹⁸ Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984), 209.

trumped by his foreknowledge—they just do not know how to reconcile it, and therefore, their extreme claim.

A grouping of passages in Isaiah Chapters 40-48 shows overwhelmingly that God has foreknowledge. Bruce Ware is right on when he says of these passages that “Here, we see the God who makes his own claim to deity on the basis of what he knows, and tells, exactly what the future will be.”¹⁹ In fact, Ware has identified “no fewer than nine separate sections” offering the same essential argument that “the true and living God, unlike imposter gods, can be known to be the true God because he alone can foretell exactly what the future will be.”²⁰ An examination of two of these sections should suffice as ample evidence. Firstly:

“I am the LORD; that is my name!
I will not give my glory to another
or my praise to idols.

See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.” (Isaiah 42:8-9)

God says he declares new things and announces them before they come into being. Included in this is obviously the things God himself will do and accomplish in the coming future; but also included in these “new things” he announces are things that have to do with the future free will acts of men. God knows these future free will acts of men because he has foreknowledge. Just a few passages earlier in Isaiah 42:4 God says, “In his law the islands will put their hope.” This is a prophecy concerning how free will creatures who had not been born yet would respond to Jesus Christ. God is prophesying that in the future people will indeed do this. It is not a calculated guess or an issue of probable outcome—because God has already told us that before it will “spring into being” he announces it.

A second section in the Isaiah material is:

“Remember this, fix it in mind,
take it to heart, you rebels.

¹⁹ Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 36. These sections are Isaiah 41:21-29; 42:8-9; 43:8-13; 44:6-8; 44:24-28; 45:20-23; 46:8-11; 48:3-8; 48:14-16.

Remember the former things, those of long ago;
 I am God, and there is no other;
 I am God, and there is none like me.
 I make known the end from the beginning,
 from ancient times, what is still to come.
 I say: My purpose will stand,
 and I will do all that I please.

From the east I summon a bird of prey;
 from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose.
 What I have said, that will I bring about;
 what I have planned, that will I do.” (Isaiah 46:8-11)

God says he makes known “the end from the beginning.” In order to do this, it means God is able to know exactly the who, what, when, where, why and how of things that are going to happen before they happen. Quite strikingly, concerning the future “bird of prey; from a far-off land, a man to fulfill my purpose,” Ware brilliantly explains how this “involves a host of future free choices and actions,”²¹ as God is

speaking no doubt of the future kingly reign of Cyrus, named and foretold at the end of chapter 45, who would be born and named nearly two hundred years after this prediction was made! And don’t minimize just how much knowledge of the future this indicates. For God to know that Cyrus would be born, would be given this name, would be raised to be king, reign as a great king, conquer as king, and accomplish the specific things God says that he “anointed” (45:1) Cyrus to do, would require of God unimaginable foreknowledge of the host of free human actions associated with the successful rise and exploits of this specific person.²²

It is undeniable from the above Isaiah passage that the God of the Bible “knows specific future events, people, free choices and actions, and their effects.”²³ Couple this with the previously examined biblical references to God’s foreknowledge and a clear biblical teaching emerges.

A comparison of open theism and the Bible shows open theism cannot conceive of a God who can learn and be affected by his creation while at the same time having exhaustive foreknowledge of future free will choices. They are so convinced that foreknowledge means we lose our free will because God has already seen it and we no longer have a choice in the matter to

²¹ Bruce A. Ware, *Their God is too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God*, 38.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Bruce A. Ware, *God’s Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 223.

perform what God saw²⁴ that they forget that it is our free will choices that God simply saw—they put the cart before the horse here because without our free will choices God does not foresee anything concerning our future. It is not God’s foreknowledge that determines our free will choices, but it is our actions and free will choices that determine God’s foreknowledge of them. In conjunction with this, God does not try to change the future of individuals based on what he has foreseen happening to them. A common argument open theist’s use to show that a God with foreknowledge could not use it to bring about a different future than what he originally foresaw is right on²⁵—it is just that it is the wrong argument to use to try and prove God does not then have foreknowledge.

It is needs to be considered that God’s foreknowledge included seeing himself change his mind in the playing out of the universe—he also then saw his own emotional involvement and responses to situations. God created a world where he limits himself to faithfulness to his initial plan of a free will universe, which included the possibility of men to sin and “failure” to occur, thus calling for a change to be made once the world was underway. For a created world to have true creaturely free will, God does not foresee in order to change things so there is no sin—that would be in a sense limiting free will—and being unfaithful to what and how he created the world. Besides, if that were true, he would have done it. The fact that he did not tells us that God was willing to accept that man would sin—he was willing to accept that he would have to make changes and intercede as the world was unfolding—his providence—in order to accomplish his will without violating free will, and all of this would have been known to God after he decided what kind of world to make.²⁶ So, is God affected and does he “learn” new things as his creation unfolds? The scriptural record says yes. But does God also have foreknowledge? The scriptural record says yes. Although it appears to be a paradox, it is not; both are affirmed and in harmony. Clark Pinnock sums up open theism’s side of this argument well when he says,

Scripture tells us that God formulates plans and purposes and that he occasionally changes his mind. To use a biblical expression, God repents. . . . The biblical descriptions of divine repentance indicate that God’s plans are exactly that—plans or possibilities that

²⁴ Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, 147.

²⁵ Ibid., 149. This argument shows God cannot warn someone of their unfortunate foreseen future in order to have them change it, because the unfortunate future God saw originally would then not have been there to foresee if it changed based on his intervention.

²⁶ Jack Cottrell, “Understanding God: God and Time,” 19.

he intends to realize. ...Factors can arise that hinder or prevent its realization. Consequently, God may reformulate his plans, or alter his intentions, in response to developments.²⁷

I would agree with this, qualified by stating that God enables himself to experience his creation while working out his plans and purposes as events unfold under the umbrella of his foreknowledge—his foreknowledge not coloring, watering down or spoiling all of his real experiences with his creation. As far as open theism’s argument that this would then reduce God’s experience with his creation to a charade,²⁸ Cottrell says,

Does such foreknowledge mean that God’s participation in the actual course of history is not genuine but is instead impersonal and robotic, as openness theologians claim? Hardly. Even on the human level, the anticipation of future events of which we are fairly certain in no way negates the pleasure (or pain) of the actual experience itself. Thus also with God, the foreknown confrontation with the “unexpected,” the foreknown feelings of regret and frustration, and the foreknown testing of individuals like Abraham in Genesis 22:12 are all experienced in reality with genuine interpersonal interaction. God is not simply *re-living* the “big bang” explosion of foreknowledge; he is *living* it for the first time with all the attendant feelings.²⁹

Open theism is right to affirm that God experiences his creation with full blown involvement, emotion, regret, frustration, and risk—it is properly reconciling this with the biblical truth of God’s foreknowledge where they have failed.

Open theism has formulated a doctrine that God does not have foreknowledge based on biblical passages that show him in real experience with his creation—feeling regret, changing his mind, testing people to see what they will do, and on—while ignoring, misapplying, and/or minimizing the passages that show he clearly has foreknowledge. They are right to declare God has a many-nuanced experience with his creation, but wrong to declare therefore he does not have foreknowledge. The Bible clearly supports the view that God has foreknowledge in every instance but is able to experience his free-will creation and not let his foreknowledge color, water down or spoil his experience.

²⁷ Clark Pinnock et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, 26.

²⁸ Bruce A. Ware, ed., *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*, 158.

²⁹ Jack Cottrell, “Understanding God: God and Time,” 21-22.

Works Cited

Belt, Thomas. "Open Theism and the Assemblies of God: A Personal Account of My Views on Open Theism." Open Theism Information Site, <http://www.opentheism.info/pages/information> (accessed November 26, 2009).

Cottrell, Jack. "Understanding God: God and Time." Cincinnati Bible Seminary, <https://moodle.ccuniversity.edu/mod/resource/view.php?id=29131> (accessed September 21, 2010).

Cottrell, Jack. *What the Bible Says About God the Ruler*. Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984. Reprint, Portland, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000.

Freddoso, Alfred J. "The 'Openness' of God: A Reply to William Hasker." *Christian Scholar's Review* 28 (1998): 124-33.

Hasker, William. "An Adequate God." In *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue Between Process and Free Will Theists*, edited by John B. Cobb, Jr., and Clark H. Pinnock, 215-45. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

Pinnock, Clark. *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001.

Pinnock, Clark, et al. *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994.

Ware, Bruce A. *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004.

Ware, Bruce A., ed. *Perspectives on the Doctrine of God: 4 Views*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2008.

Ware, Bruce A. *Their God is too Small: Open Theism and the Undermining of Confidence in God*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003.