

what did God know, and when did He know it.

assessing open theism

bruce ware

Christians throughout history have been strengthened by their confidence that God knows everything about the future. But consider this:

What if it simply is not true?

What if God can only rely on His best guess about tomorrow — just as you and I do?

Would it not affect your trust in Him, your confidence in facing the future, your worship, and your motivation to leave everything in His hands?

And yet this is the consequence that has to be faced if you trust what a number of leading voices in evangelicalism are proposing under the doctrine of open theism.

In its redefinition of the nature of divine providence, open theism adjusts the entire picture of God's sovereignty and involvement in our lives. Open theism's denial of exhaustive divine foreknowledge provides the basis for the major lines of difference between the openness view and all versions of classical theism, including any other version of Arminianism. The implications of denying that God knows what the future holds are enormous. It is incumbent upon us to take this proposal seriously and weigh the evidence...

open theism's "straightforward" reading of divine growth-in-knowledge texts

One of the initial appeals of the openness proposal is its challenge that we take the text of Scripture simply for what it says. Stop making it say the opposite of what it so clearly and plainly does say, openness proponents argue. When the Lord says to Abraham,

for now I know that you fear God
[Gen. 22:12]

we should allow these words to speak and mean exactly what normal conversational speech would convey. That is, God truly and literally learned what he previously had not known; this was a real test, openness advocates insist, and God learned the results only when Abraham acted.

Behind this insistence, of course, is an underlying hermeneutic. Openness defenders propose that the "straightforward" or "literal" or "face value" meaning of these passages is the correct meaning. Throughout *God of the Possible*, for example, Greg Boyd commends his interpretation of text after text by affirming that his understanding takes these passages in a straightforward fashion. Here are a few sample statements:

The open view is rooted in the conviction that the passages that constitute the motif of future openness should be taken just as literally as the passages that constitute the motif of future determinism.
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In reference to Isaiah 5:1-5, he states,

If we take the passage at face value, does it not imply that the future of Israel, the 'vineyard,' was not certain until they settled it by choosing to yield 'wild grapes'?
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Commenting on Exodus 4:19, Boyd bemoans the fact that many interpreters fail to acknowledge God's ignorance of how many miracles it might take to convince the people of Israel that Moses has been sent by God. He writes,

If we believe that God speaks straightforwardly, however, it seems he did not foreknow with certainty exactly how many miracles it would take to get the elders of Israel to believe Moses.
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Interpreting 2 Peter 3:12

as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming

Boyd says,

If taken at face value, the verse is teaching us that how people respond to the gospel and how Christians live affects the timing of the second coming.
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And, in a summary statement of his position, Boyd writes,

All the evidence indicates that the verses signifying divine openness should be interpreted every bit as literally as the verses signifying the settledness of the future.
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As a general rule, I believe it is wise to adopt Boyd's hermeneutical reflex, if I might use this term. Generally, he is right that we ought to take the straightforward meaning of the text as the intended meaning, even when that straightforward meaning is not culturally acceptable; and we ought to be very reticent to deny any straightforward reading unless there is compelling reason to think that such a straightforward reading is not the intended meaning of the text. Lutherans and Zwinglians, for example, disagree over whether we ought to take the words of Jesus, **This is my body**, in a straightforward manner. Luther felt strongly that the literal meaning of Jesus' statement was the intended meaning, whereas Zwingli believed that there were good biblical reasons for seeing this statement as metaphorical and representational. For Zwingli, **This is my body** must be interpreted like **I am the good shepherd, I am the bread from heaven, I am the living water, and I am the door**. While I agree with Zwingli on this issue, I also affirm that we should only deny the literal meaning that Luther had insisted on if — and what an important if this is — the reasons are compelling that Jesus actually meant his statement to be understood in a metaphorical, not literal, fashion. So, while I am very sympathetic with the openness insistence on respecting Scripture's straightforward meaning, this openness hermeneutic raises the question — an extremely important question for the outcome of the issues at hand — whether in this particular case, regarding these so-called openness passages, we should rightly accept the straightforward meaning as the authorially intended meaning of these texts.

genesis 22:12 reconsidered

Let's test this hermeneutic by beginning with Genesis 22:12, one of the favorite passages of the defenders of the open view of God. Recall that in this text, God says that he learns the state of Abraham's heart, "**for now I know that you fear God**" as he observes Abraham's willingness to offer Isaac on the altar. Without any question, the most straightforward and literal meaning of

these words is just as openness advocates say it is. God now learned what previously he had not known. When Abraham actually raised the knife, then and only then was God able to say, now I know that you fear me. God learned something he had not known before, and this demonstrates that he does not have exhaustive knowledge of the future-so argues the open theist.

But, probing this understanding and the Scriptures a bit deeper, how does this straightforward interpretation of Genesis 22:12 fare? There are at least three problems raised by this openness interpretation.

First, if God must test Abraham to find out what is in his heart (recall that the text says, **for now I know that you fear God**), then it calls into question God's present knowledge of Abraham's inner spiritual, psychological, mental, and emotional state.

Consider that 1 Chronicles 28:9

for the LORD searches all hearts, and understands every intent of the thoughts

and 1 Samuel 16:7

God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart

teach us that God knows fully the thoughts and intentions of the hearts and inner lives of people. So, doesn't God know Abraham fully? In fact, doesn't God know the state of Abraham's heart better than Abraham himself does? Is there any facet of Abraham's inner thoughts, feelings, doubts, fears, hopes, dreams, reasonings, musings, inclinations, predispositions, habits, tendencies, reflexes, and patterns, that God does not know absolutely, fully, and certainly? Does not God understand Abraham perfectly? Cannot God read Abraham exactly?

Because the openness interpretation of Genesis 22:12 claims that only when Abraham raises the knife to kill his son does God know Abraham's heart, this open view interpretation cannot avoid denying of God at least some knowledge of the present. As such, this straightforward interpretation ends up conflicting with Scripture's affirmation that God knows all that is, and it contradicts open theism's own commitment to God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present.

Second, the even more interesting and important question is this:

Does God need this test to know specifically whether Abraham fears God?

That is, while it is significant that the openness interpretation implicitly denies God's present knowledge (the first point), even more telling here is the implicit denial of the specific content of this present knowledge, that is, knowledge that Abraham fears God. For we are told that only at the point that Abraham raises the knife over his son does God then learn that Abraham in fact fears God. But is it reasonable to think that God really does not know until this moment whether Abraham is God-fearing?

Granting that God knows Abraham's inner life perfectly, it seems highly doubtful, even by openness standards, that God actually and truly learns at this moment that Abraham is God-fearing. In general, open theists are sympathetic with this argument. They respect and even appeal to God's intimate and perfect knowledge of his creatures' inner states of mind and heart. Consider on this issue how convenient Boyd finds it to appeal exactly to God's perfect knowledge

of people's inner lives in his explanation of Jesus' prediction of Peter's three denials of Christ. Boyd writes:

Sometimes we may understand the Lord's foreknowledge of a person's behavior simply by supposing that the person's character, combined with the Lord's perfect knowledge of all future variables, makes the person's future behavior certain. As we know, character becomes more predictable over time. The longer we persist in a chosen path, the more that path becomes part of who we are.... Our omniscient Creator knows us perfectly, far better than we even know ourselves. Hence we can assume that he is able to predict our behavior far more extensively and accurately than we could predict it ourselves.'

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Amazingly, Boyd uses this line of reasoning to explain how Jesus could predict accurately that Peter would deny him three times. More will be said on Peter's denials later in this chapter, but suffice it here to suggest that if one compares the two cases, Abraham's heart seems far more predictable than Peter's three denials. That is, it seems apparent that Abraham's past conduct provides a better basis for knowing the state of his heart than Peter's past expressions of character would have provided for predicting that he would deny Christ specifically three times. And yet, with Abraham, we are told that until he raised the knife over Isaac's body, God did not know whether he feared him.

Consider this: Romans 4:18-22 tells us that Abraham had such strong faith in God that even when both he and Sarah grew old and so moved past their ability to parent children, year after year Abraham believed that God would keep his promise and give Sarah and him a son! **In hope againsta, hope, and without becoming weak in faith, and giving glory to God** are phrases in this account which reveal that Abraham truly, faithfully, and lastingly feared God and he did so all these years, long before the Genesis 22 test of sacrificing Isaac. Abraham's faith in God, in fact, is so notable that the apostle Paul uses it in Romans 4 as a supreme illustration of the nature of true faith. Clearly God knows this about Abraham.

Consider this also: Hebrews 11:8-12, 17-19 is devoted to the faith of Abraham, charting his faith all the way from his call in Ur of the Chaldeans through the episode of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. Through each of these instances in the lives of Abraham and Sarah, a consistent pattern of faith in God is evident. And the writer to the Hebrews chooses to emphasize particularly Abraham's consistent and commendable heart of faith. Clearly God knows this about Abraham.

One more observation is especially important. Hebrews 11: 19 says of Abraham and his choice to obey God's command to sacrifice Isaac, that **he [Abraham] considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him [Isaac]aback as a type.** My question is this: When did Abraham consider that God is able to raise people even from the dead? Was this after God had stopped Abraham from killing Isaac? Obviously not. Why would he afterward think of this and put his hope in God for it, for now he knows God is not going to demand the life of Isaac after all.

The point of this statement in Hebrews 11:19 is that Abraham was prepared to obey God's command to kill his beloved son, knowing that God could raise Isaac even from the dead if he so chose. It was this confidence that Abraham had in God that led him to obey God's command, to travel to Mt. Moriah, build the altar, fetter his son atop its wood, and raise his knife to plunge it into Isaac's flesh. No doubt, the writer to the Hebrews is reflecting here on Abraham's own words of hope, when to his helper he said,

Stay here with the donkey, and I and the lad will go over there; and we will worship and return to you.
[Gen. 22:5]

What confidence in God in the face of such an enormous test! But if Abraham had this confidence in God prior to his action, if Abraham was praying, reflecting, and contemplating in his own heart and mind, trusting that God would be able even to raise Isaac from the dead, if Abraham was even planning to return with Isaac, and if Abraham was doing this prior to raising his knife, then does this not demonstrate that Abraham truly has a heart that fears God, and that he has this God-fearing heart before (and as) he lifts the knife? Yes, and clearly God knows this about Abraham.

Because Abraham has such a God-fearing heart before the actual attempted sacrifice takes place, and since God knows Abraham's heart perfectly, then it simply cannot be the case that only when Abraham raised his knife, only then and not before, does God learn that Abraham fears him. If Hebrews 11:19 (as reinforced by Genesis 22:5) makes anything clear on this issue, it demonstrates without any doubt that Abraham had a God-fearing heart leading up to his sacrifice of Isaac. Since God knows this, it is absolutely wrong to interpret Genesis 22:12 as saying that only when Abraham lifted the knife did God "learn" that Abraham feared God. The openness interpretation, then, stumbles over Scripture's clear warrant for denying, in this case, the literal, straightforward interpretation proposed. Both the pattern of Abraham's faith commended in Romans 4 and Hebrews 11, and the specific reference in Hebrews 11: 19 to Abraham believing, before the attempted sacrifice, that God could raise Isaac from the dead, give clear biblical warrant for taking Genesis 22:12 anthropomorphically and analogically, not literally and at face value.

Third, given the openness commitment to the nature of libertarian freedom, God's test of Abraham simply cannot have accomplished what open theists claim it has. Notice carefully the interpretive comments on this text made by John Sanders and Greg Boyd. Sanders writes,

God needs to know if Abraham is the sort of person on whom God can count for collaboration toward the fulfillment of the divine project. Will he be faithful? Or must God find someone else through whom to achieve his purpose? God has been faithful; will Abraham be faithful?

[pp 52-53]

And Boyd's comment on Genesis 22:12 reads:

The verse clearly says that it was because Abraham did what he did that the Lord now knew he was a faithful covenant partner.

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According to these openness advocates, Abraham's testing proved to God now that Abraham was a faithful covenant partner who, therefore, could be trusted to be faithful in working with God in the fulfillment of God's covenant purposes. But since Abraham possesses libertarian freedom, and since even God can be taken aback by improbable and implausible human actions, what assurances could God have that Abraham would remain faithful in the future? One realizes how transient the "now I know" is for God. As soon as the test is over, another test would seemingly be required."

And notice, too, an interesting dilemma faced in the openness understanding of Abraham's testing. At best, what God could come to know, on openness grounds, is whether or not Abraham's passing the test demonstrated the continuation of a pattern of behavior that would render Abraham's future faithfulness more probable. But of course, on the one hand, if Abraham's passing of this test confirms further a pattern of faithfulness Abraham had already demonstrated in his life of trust and obedience, then it could not be literally true that in this test (i.e., the test of the sacrifice of Isaac) God learned now that Abraham feared him. On the other hand, if Abraham

passed this test in striking contrast to a pattern of his previous unfaithfulness, why would God then conclude that Abraham would remain faithful in the future, even when he had passed this test, given his previous pattern of disobedience? Either way, whether Abraham had previously demonstrated a pattern of faithfulness or not, the singular and transcendent nature of this specific test demonstrates that what openness proponents claim God learned simply could not have been gained.

It is clear, then, that the openness interpretation fails. Because God knows our hearts intimately, he knew previously every hope and fear, every thought and inclination of Abraham's heart as Abraham ascended Mt. Moriah and proceeded to bind his son. Further, there is strong and compelling biblical warrant from Genesis 22:5, Romans 4, and Hebrews 11 for affirming God's previous knowledge of Abraham's deep trust and fear of God. It is biblically untenable to claim that only when Abraham raised the knife did God then, and not until then, learn that Abraham feared God. And, given the nature of Abraham's ongoing libertarian freedom (as understood in open theism), God simply could not have known from this test whether Abraham would be faithful in the future. What open theists claim God gained from this was, on openness grounds, either already known to God (so he did not learn something new in this test) or at best was a transient and passing truth (which could give no real assurance of how Abraham would act in the future). The straightforward meaning open theists commend simply cannot be the intended meaning of this text.

Yet, clearly this text (and all others cited in support of the openness view) has an intended meaning. It simply will not do to say, in response to the openness proposal, that when Genesis 22:12 says, **for now I know** it means, for I have eternally known. Openness advocates are right to point to something that takes place in relation to God when Abraham lifts his knife. But if this statement cannot refer to a literal acquiring of knowledge that Abraham fears God — knowledge of which God was ignorant until Abraham raised the knife to kill Isaac — what can this statement mean?

I have argued elsewhere that the divine immutability is best understood as involving God's unchangeable nature (ontological immutability) and promise, but that Scripture (ethical immutability) does not lead us to think of God as unchangeable in every respect (absolute immutability). Importantly, God is changeable in relationship with his creation, particularly with human and angelic moral creatures he has made to live in relationship with him. In this relational mutability, God does not change in his essential nature, purposes, will, knowledge, or wisdom; but he does interact with his people in the experiences of their lives as these unfold in time. God actually enters into relationship with his people, while knowing from eternity all that they will face.

Therefore, when God observes Abraham bind his son to the altar he has crafted and raise his knife to plunge it into his body, God literally sees and experiences in this moment what he has known from eternity. When the angel of the LORD utters the statement, **for now I know that you fear God**, this expresses the idea that

in the experience of this action, I (God) am witnessing Abraham demonstrate dramatically and afresh that he fears me, and I find this both pleasing and acceptable in my sight.

Through Abraham's action of faith and fear of God, God sees and enters into the experience of this action of obedience, which action and heart of faith he has previously known fully and perfectly. What this kind of interpretation offers is a way to understand the text as communicating a present and experiential reality that is true of God at the moment of Abraham's act of faith, while it also safeguards what Scripture elsewhere demands, the previous full and perfect knowledge God had of Abraham's fear of him. Open theists are right to say that this text demands that we understand something happening in relation to God at this moment, but they are wrong on Scriptural grounds to take the straightforward reading of this text and say that what happened in God is that he literally learned at this moment that Abraham feared him. Rather, God has

witnessed and experienced in this moment what he had always known, and it is this that is communicated by the phrase, **for now I know**

genesis 3:8-13

A little reflection on similar passages exposes further problems with this straightforward approach to such texts. I begin with Genesis 3:8. Several features of this verse are peculiar on a straightforward reading. The man and woman of God in the garden, the sound heard the sound they heard was of God walking in the garden, and the man and woman. On a hid themselves from the presence of the LORD straightforward reading, God has physical characteristics such that he can make sounds, his physical nature can be heard as he (bodily?) walks in the garden, and most significantly, God can be hidden from, thus indicating that he is spatially located and delimited. All this raises the question whether one ought to read such texts in a straightforward manner. If the open theist also denies that we should, then the obvious question becomes, where is a straightforward reading legitimate and where is it not? Certainly, then, it won't work to commend the openness interpretation of various texts simply by asserting that the openness understanding respects the straightforward meaning of these passages. We all agree that the straightforward meaning sometimes cannot be the correct meaning. We will explore this further, but consider first some even more directly relevant features of this text.

In Genesis 3:9, with the man and woman hiding among the trees of the garden following the first sin, we read:

Then the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?"

Now, what would a straightforward reading here yield? It appears (1) that God does not presently know where the man is, and (2) that God is spatially located (i.e., not everywhere present) so that he is unaware of where the man is hiding until the man reveals himself. In other words, to read this text in the same manner many other texts are read by openness proponents would result in a denial of God's exhaustive present knowledge and a denial of his omnipresence.

The problem only gets worse as we read on in the Genesis 3 narrative. In verse 11, God asks the man,

Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?

Here we add another doctrinal denial to the above two. God's second question, "**Have you eaten ... ?**" implies, on a straightforward reading, that God does not know what has happened in the past. His question to the man, taken at face value, serves the purpose of informing God as to whether the man had violated God's prohibition. And, as we continue reading, God's similar question to the woman in verse 13, "**What is this you have done?**" likewise indicates God's ignorance of the woman's previous action. Altogether, then, if we apply the openness hermeneutic to this passage, we are forced to deny God's exhaustive knowledge of the past, God's exhaustive knowledge of the present, and God's omnipresence.

Clearly open theists are unwilling, by their own stated commitments, to deny any of these doctrines. But how can they avoid doing so? If the hermeneutic applies to Genesis 22:12a, (as open theists understand it) should it not also apply to Genesis 3:8-13? It appears that the only way to avoid the undesirable doctrinal implications of this straightforward reading of the problematic statements in Genesis 3 is to deny the so-called straightforward reading itself. Surely openness advocates will agree. Given their doctrinal commitments, their response will be that there are a number of biblical passages which inform us that God has comprehensive knowledge

of the past and present, and many passages teach that God is omnipresent, so in this passage, we need to understand statements such as, **Where are you?** and **What is this you have done?** As rhetorical and anthropomorphic (i.e., as understood in common human ways of speaking that should be taken in a nonliteralistic, non-straightforward manner).

But if that is so here, why not also in Genesis 22:12? That is, even apart from the reasons raised above for denying a straightforward reading of Genesis 22:12, would not a comparison with Genesis 3:8-13 raise the question of whether the former is being interpreted correctly? Is not the issue, then, whether Scripture elsewhere teaches, with sufficient clarity and fullness, that God has exhaustive knowledge of the past, present, and future so as to see other purposes served in these texts than that of teaching us that God has just learned something new?

genesis 18:9-21

Consider another “growth-in-knowledge” text.¹² In Genesis 18, three men visit and dine with Abraham. While eating, the men (who apparently represent, at least in one of the members, a theophany, since **the LORD** is used following this) inquire of Abraham in verse 9, **Where is Sarah your wife?** Apparently they do not know, so they ask where Sarah is. But does not **the LORD** know at this moment where Sarah is? Apparently not. Perhaps this by itself could be set aside (wrongly, in my view) by appeal to the **three men** of the account. Reading on, however, much larger problems arise. Just before leaving for Sodom, **the LORD** speaks to Abraham. Genesis 18:20-21 reads,

And the LORD said, The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is indeed great, and their sin is exceedingly grave. I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know.

Again, a moment's reflection on this text reveals the severe doctrinal implications that would follow were one to employ here the openness hermeneutic of Genesis 22:12. By God's own admission, first, he does not presently know whether the sin of Sodom is as great as its outcry. Second, he does not know the past sin of Sodom fully, since he must see if they have done according to its outcry. Third, he is not omnipresent, since he needs to travel there and only then will be able to see what the status of their sin is; when he arrives and looks, then (and only then) he will “know.” Hermeneutical consistency, it would seem, requires that if Genesis 22:12 means that God learned something new, as open theists claim, then Genesis 18:21 means that God does not know all of the past or present and that he is spatially confined. So which should it be? Shall we follow the openness approach consistently and deny even more of God's attributes than have already been trimmed away? Or shall we, with great caution and care, consider whether Scripture elsewhere teaches, with sufficient clarity and fullness, that God in fact knows the past, present, and future and is everywhere present, in order then to reconsider the narrative and personal dialogue form of these Genesis texts (and others), to discern in them their proper and intended meanings? We shall return to this question below after consideration of some other texts relating to the question of God's knowledge of the future.

“entering-God’s-mind” texts

An intriguing line of defense for the openness position comes from a handful of texts in which God says that it has (e.g., Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35) never entered his mind that Israel would act as they have. Here, it appears, God is totally ignorant of some particular kind of behavior until it occurs. When Israel performs this behavior, then, presumably, knowledge of the behavior “enters” God's mind. Commenting on these verses, Boyd states:

Three times the Lord expresses shock over Israel's ungodly behavior by saying that they were doing things **which I did not command or decree, nor did it enter my mind** “ Jer. 19:5; see also 7:3 1; 32:35 “. However we understand the phrase **nor did it enter my mind**, it would at the very least seem to preclude the possibility that the Israelites' idolatrous behavior was eternally certain in God's mind. If the classical view is correct, we have to be willing to accept that God could in one breath say that the Israelites' behavior “did not enter my mind,” though their behavior “was eternally in my mind.” If this is not a contradiction, what is?
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Two responses are in order. First, since open theists affirm God's awareness of all possibilities (i.e., omniscience is defined as God's comprehensive knowledge of everything past and present, of everything logically entailed from the past or present, and of all, it cannot literally be the case that “it neverpossible states of affairs) entered God's mind” that Israel would behave as she did. God has known from eternity that this could happen, even on openness criteria.

Second, and more important, Jeremiah 19:5, from which Boyd cites his phrase “nor did it enter my mind,” reads:

[Judah and Jerusalem] **have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind (emphasis added).**

Jeremiah 7:31 says essentially the same thing, but 32:35 should be noted:

They built the high places of Baal that are in the valley of Ben-hinnom to cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire to Molech, which I had not commanded them nor had it entered My mind that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin (emphasis added).

The specific “ungodly behavior” that Jeremiah points to is the horrible act of Israel burning their sons and daughters on the altars of the high places. Since this is the sin the prophet has in mind, it is especially important to note that God warned Israel against committing this specific evil act hundreds of years earlier. Deuteronomy 12:31 warns Israel not to follow after the gods of the nations, **for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods**. Similarly, Deuteronomy 18: 10 warns, **There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire. . . .** And in light of the reference to Molech in Jeremiah 32:35, it is especially noteworthy that Leviticus 18:21 says, **You shall not give any of your offspring to offer them to Molech**

Can we rightly take these statements in Jeremiah as indicating that God had not thought about or known in advance about this kind of horrible behavior? Clearly not, since he several times warned them against committing it. Or can we even take these statements to this specific sin mean that he had never conceived of Israel performing such actions? This also cannot be, since the warnings were given to Israel. Clearly neither of these interpretations is possible in light of the texts we have seen from Deuteronomy and Leviticus. God not only had known of this kind of behavior far in advance, he had furthermore warned Israel herself not to enter into such behavior. Therefore, these ideas simply could not literally have entered God's mind for the first time at the point when Israel actually acted in such a despicable way. Apparently we are to understand by these phrases the extreme disapproval God has for his people in this vile activity:

God expresses his disapproval by saying that it is a kind of behavior so vile, so wicked, so detestable that he does not want even to consider such a thing as happening — although, as we have seen, he in fact does know about such behavior.

Once again, it is apparent that the underlying issue in the interpretation of these Jeremiah texts, as with all the proposed "openness" texts here considered, is whether Scripture gives us sufficient warrant for looking beyond the straightforward understanding of these texts in order to discern their intended meanings.

divine remembrance (forgetfulness?) texts

Another biblical theme that strains the openness hermeneutic involves God being reminded of, or seeking to remember, certain things about the past. For example, in Genesis 9:13-17, God sets the rainbow in the sky in order **to remember the everlasting covenant** he made with Noah. Given the openness hermeneutic, why should a straightforward reading not be given of this text? Or in Isaiah 62:6, God says that he has appointed watchmen (likely angels) on the walls of the new Jerusalem whose job it is, night and day, **to remind the LORD** of his pledge. Many more such examples could be given, but what is especially interesting about these two instances is that God actually establishes a mechanism for being reminded. God puts the rainbow in the cloud so that when he sees it, he will remember the covenant with Noah. God appoints watchmen whose constant purpose it is to remind God of his gracious pledge to Israel.

Why would readers of the openness proposal not also naturally think that these passages indicate, by a straightforward reading, that God has a faulty memory? At least God knows this about himself (!), they might reason, and surely that is commendable, perhaps even more commendable, due to its greater difficulty, than would be true of God in the traditional view. He purposely puts reminders in place so that he won't forget—a sort of divine version of a string tied to one's finger. But the fact is, on a straightforward reading, God is at least potentially forgetful. What confidence can open theism give that this interpretation is wrong, and that this is not true about God, apart from sheer assertion that it is not? Does not their hermeneutical appeal lead to such a possible reading of these texts? Again we face the pivotal question of the basis by which we might understand whether God's knowledge of the past, present, and future is exhaustive. Appeal to the so-called openness texts on their own, saying that a straightforward reading of them requires the view that God lacks knowledge of the future, is simply not convincing.

conditional future texts

A number of passages present God as saying, often through his prophets, that some future possible situation may, thus occur indicating for open theists that God does not know whether it will or will not occur. In Exodus 4, for example, when Moses worries that the people will not believe that the Lord has sent him, God gives him several attesting miracles to perform so that if they don't believe after one miracle, they may believe after another. Also, passages such as Exodus 13:17, Jeremiah 26:3, and Ezekiel 12:3 use words such as "perhaps" and "may" to indicate that whether the people will obey or not is evidently not known, even to God. Do these texts, then, indicate God's ignorance of the future actions of his people?

First, one should be extremely hesitant to draw this conclusion in light of many other texts in which God declares just what his people will do. In chapter 5 of *God's Lesser Glory* I explore the substantial biblical[of] support for God's knowledge of future free actions. For now, let it simply be noted that every reference to God's knowing in advance of some future free choice would give one great pause in thinking that, in these "conditional future" texts, God literally does not know what his people will do.

For example, when God declares in Deuteronomy 31:21,

for I know their intent [Israel's spurning God and turning to other gods 31:20] **which they are developing today, before I have brought them into the land**

and when the song of Moses in the next chapter assumes their rebellion, God's judgment, Israel's captivity by other nations, and then God's merciful deliverance, it is clear that these aspects of the future are not "open" in God's sight; he knows what innumerable freewill agents will do, and he tells them in advance precisely how the future will unfold.

Or consider God's predicting the very name of Cyrus, the rise and fall of nations not yet in existence, the words that come off our lips moment by moment, specific actions such as Jesus being pierced (the or the bartering other two men crucified with him were not pierced) for his clothing or his being buried in the grave of a rich man instead with the criminals, or Peter's three denials of Christ—all of these accurately predicted events and many more (see *God's Lesser Glory* chapter 5) should give one great reluctance to conclude that "conditional future" texts are really intended to teach us that God honestly and literally does not know what will happen.

Second, there is another reason why God may use such language as "perhaps," "may," and "if." Although he knows what will occur, he may be purposely withholding this information from others. Now, granted, God sometimes tells people precisely what will occur (as stated above). But in other cases God may think it best that they do not know. Take the situation with Moses, for example. God might have said to Moses, "When you tell the people that I have sent you, and when you perform one miracle, at that point they will believe" (in a way comparable to Jesus telling Peter that before the cock crows he will deny him three times). But, had God said this to Moses, Moses would not have had to trust God through the whole experience in the same way he did, not knowing how the people might respond. So, the "perhapses" and "maybes" may be for our sake; they do not necessarily indicate that God does not know.

Third, from our human standpoint, the conditionality is real. You'll obey me, I will bless you; if you disobey me, I will judge you. From our standpoint it is absolutely true that perhaps we may obey or perhaps we may not, and depending on what we do, God will respond in an appropriate measure.

questions-about-the-future texts

Some texts portray God as musing over the future, even asking questions that would appear to reflect his uncertainty about how things will develop. Numbers 14:11 records,

The LORD said to Moses, How long will this people spurn Me? And how long will they not believe in Me, despite all the signs which I have performed in their midst?

And Hosea 8:5 says concerning God,

He has rejected your calf, O Samaria, saying, My anger burns against them! How long will they be incapable of innocence?

Shall we adopt a straightforward interpretation of these texts and affirm that God honestly puzzles over why and how long his people will remain disobedient?

Commenting on these passages, Boyd denies that the questions of these texts are parallel to the question God asks in Genesis 3:8-9. You will recall that there, God asked the man, **Where are you?** Actually, though Boyd does not mention it, God's questions continue through 3:13. In these verses, God also asks the man, **Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?** (3:11); and he inquires of the woman, **What is this you have done?** (3:13). As seen previously, a straightforward reading of **Where are you?** (3:9) would deny God's omnipresence primarily while also questioning God's exhaustive knowledge of the

present, whereas a straightforward understanding of the other three questions (not mentioned by Boyd) would deny God's exhaustive past and present knowledge. Boyd argues as follows:

Some suggest that in these verses [Num. 14:11 and Hosea 8:5] the Lord was asking rhetorical questions, just as he had done when he asked Adam and Eve where they were (Gen. 3:8-9). This is a possible interpretation, but not a necessary one. Unlike God's question about location in Genesis, there is nothing in these texts or in the whole of Scripture that requires these questions to be rhetorical. Moreover, the fact that the Lord continued for centuries, with much frustration, to try to get the Israelites not to "despise" him and to be "innocent" suggests that the wonder expressed in these questions was genuine. The duration of the Israelites' stubbornness was truly an open issue."
[page 59]

A few responses are needed.

First, to say that the Numbers and Hosea questions are unlike the Genesis question about location means that Boyd is employing, albeit implicitly, a mechanism for distinguishing when and when not to take texts at their face value. Evidently the "Where are you?" question qualifies to be interpreted non-literally and rhetorically because there is something "in these texts or in the whole of Scripture" that "requires" this to be the case. Therefore Boyd's repeated complaint that classical theists fail to take the straightforward meaning of the text seriously is a shallow, empty criticism. Boyd does the same thing himself here, and in this particular case he surely is right to do so.

Second, omitting the other questions in Genesis 3:8-13 makes it easier to maintain the supposed contrast between the question of 3:8-9 and the questions of Numbers and Hosea. But actually, the other three Genesis questions all have to do with God's knowledge of the past and present. Might not someone argue from this Genesis text and many others that a straightforward reading of these texts shows that God has limited knowledge of the past and present? It begins to look a bit like special pleading when only those texts which have to do with God's limited knowledge of the future are considered literally true, but all of the rest of those which speak of his limited knowledge of the past and present are ignored or taken to be obviously non-straightforward in their meanings. But, to account for a passage such as Genesis 3:10-13 in a way that upholds God's comprehensive knowledge of the past and present, the open theist must acknowledge the principle of appealing to other, broader scriptural teachings about God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present, on the basis of which we can rightly set aside the straightforward and literal meaning of these texts as their intended meaning.

Third, regarding the questions recorded in Numbers and Hosea, how can Boyd say so dogmatically that "there is nothing in these texts or in the whole of Scripture that requires these questions to be rhetorical" ? This assertion proves nothing but only begs the question. The very question at hand is just this: whether the whole of biblical teaching justifies taking texts such as these in Numbers and Hosea in some way other than a straightforward manner. Certainly Boyd has done just this with Genesis 3:8-9. Is not this debate with him (and with other open theists) precisely whether the same principle he uses to avoid a straightforward reading of Genesis 3:9 (*Where are you?*) should also be employed in interpreting Numbers 14:11 (*How long will this people despise me?*)?

Fourth, Boyd comments on how long God must endure the disobedience of his people and states his view that "the duration of the Israelites' stubbornness was truly an open issue." I wonder how this is the case with a God who is capable of so working in his people's hearts that he causes them to obey him? Both Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-36 stress God's new covenant promise that in the time that God chooses, he will so transform his people that they will fully and completely walk in his statutes and obey his ordinances. They will fully know the Lord! The new covenant, says Jeremiah, will not be like the old covenant that Israel violated. In contrast, this

covenant will be unbreakable! Admittedly, such immeasurable power and lavish grace to accomplish unconditional and comprehensive transformation of God's people is a concept sadly foreign to open theists, but it is what these two new covenant texts teach. The God of the Bible, the God who establishes his new and unbreakable covenant with his people, is simply not frustrated (in the sense with which Boyd speaks) with how long they disobey. Boyd's claim that "the Israelites' stubbornness was truly an open issue" is wrong because both Jeremiah and Ezekiel disagree.

conclusion

As often noted, the question arises of whether all these so-called "openness" texts should be interpreted at face value, that is, by their straightforward and literal meanings. While this is always the interpretive starting point, as it were, one can often be led astray if one insists that the straightforward meaning is in fact the intended and correct meaning. In principle, open theists agree with this line of reasoning.

For example, openness proponents agree that references to God's eyes, arms, hands, etc., should not be taken in a straightforward manner. Because Scripture gives us strong reason for thinking that God is an infinite spiritual and omnipresent being, nearly all have believed that there is ample justification to deny the straightforward meaning of these bodily ascriptions to deity. So the real issue here is not whether these "openness" texts when interpreted in a straightforward manner yield the conclusion that God lacks exhaustive knowledge of the future. Many of these texts do yield such a conclusion when interpreted in that way! And most classical theists would agree. The real issue is whether the intended and correct understanding of these passages is uncovered when they are taken simply at face value.

Stated differently, the issue is whether the authorially intended meaning is the straightforward meaning. And, as shown above, open theists must acknowledge this hermeneutical question as legitimate, because openness advocates affirm that there are other categories of texts (e.g., texts concerning God's bodily parts, God's limited knowledge of the past and present, and God's spatial locatedness) where, if a straightforward understanding were taken, we would clearly arrive at wrong conclusions.

Along the same lines, I suspect that openness advocates would yield to their classical theist colleagues in admitting that a straightforward reading of Genesis 18:21 would indicate that God lacks exhaustive past knowledge, present knowledge, and omnipresence (if they do not agree with us here, I surely would like to know why). But of course, on openness criteria alone, such a straightforward interpretation would be unacceptable. We know, the open theist would say, that God knows everything past and present and that he is omnipresent. So, in this case, a straightforward reading must not reflect the correct and intended meaning of the passage.

But of course, the critical question is precisely this: Why here, but not with Genesis 22:12? Why this text, but not some other so-called "openness" texts? As examination is given now to the openness handling of the divine repentance texts, this hermeneutical question will be addressed further.

open theism's "straightforward" reading of **divine repentance** texts

In a similar fashion, openness proponents take the divine repentance texts in a straightforward manner. So when we read, for example,

So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people “
[Ex. 32:14]

openness proponents believe we should understand this to indicate that God was confronted with a previously unknown situation that resulted in his reassessing his plans and changing his mind about what he intended to do. Granted, the simplest and most straightforward reading of this passage, and others like it, would lead one to this interpretation. But as we have seen above, the simplest and most straightforward reading may not be the correct reading. How can we know?

Part of the answer, I have argued elsewhere, is to inquire as to whether it is possible that such divine repentance statements may best be understood as anthropomorphic. Consider this working definition:

A given ascription to God may rightly be understood as anthropomorphic when Scripture clearly presents God as transcending the very human or finite features it elsewhere attributes to him.

In relation to the question of the divine repentance, two texts in particular describe God as not capable of repenting, and if these biblical statements represent a broad and comprehensive teaching about God's nature, then we have here a case in which Scripture presents God as transcending (i.e., in some sense he does not repent because he, as God, transcends human repentance) the very human or finite feature it elsewhere attributes to him (i.e., in some sense he does repent). Consider briefly these texts.

Numbers 23:19, expressed by Balaam in his second oracle, reads:

God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

There is no question but that the purpose of this statement is to reinforce the certainty with which God pledges to accomplish the blessing (not cursing!) on Israel stated in Balaam's first oracle. God's will is set; he will not be deterred from performing his will as already declared. But it simply will not do to turn this declaration merely into a statement concerning God's pledge in this particular, concrete, historical situation alone. Consider two reasons.

First, if, as open theists understand this text, it is taken as generally true that God can repent, but that in this particular case he chooses not to, then does it not follow from this text that, while it is generally true that God can lie, in this particular case he chooses not to? That is, the parallelism of lying and repenting indicates that just as God cannot lie, he cannot repent. The question becomes, then, can God ever lie? Second Timothy 2:13, Titus 1:2, and Hebrews 6:18 state explicitly not only that God does not lie; they declare that he cannot lie. It appears, then, that the parallel relation of God's repentance with lying would lead one to conclude that this passage is teaching more than simply that in this particular historical situation God chooses not to lie or repent. Rather, just as God can never lie, so He can never repent.

Second, notice the contrast made between God and man. God is not like a man who, presumably, both lies and repents. Does not the force of this claim evaporate the instant one reads it to say, in this particular situation God is not like a man and so does not repent? Do men (i.e., human beings) always repent of what they say they will do? If so, the contrast can be maintained. But if human beings sometimes carry out what they say and sometimes repent and do otherwise, and if God, likewise sometimes carries out what he says and sometimes repents and does otherwise, then how is God different from humans? The only way the contrast works is if God, unlike men, never repents. It is generally true, not merely situationally true, that God does not repent.

1st Samuel 15:29 makes its claim for God's non-repentance, strikingly, in a context in which it is twice affirmed (I Sam. 15:11 and 35) that God does repent. Samuel says,

the Glory of Israel will not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man that He should change His mind. "
[Sam. 15:29]

One may immediately notice that both arguments developed above to support the general truth of God's non-repentance from Numbers 23:19 apply here as well. That is, the parallelism with lying (also in I Sam. 15:29) would suggest that, just as God never lies, he likewise never repents. The two need to be treated alike. To say that God sometimes repents (e.g., I Sam. 15:11, 35) and sometimes doesn't (I Sam. 15:29) would be to argue that he sometimes lies and, in the same sense as with "repent," sometimes doesn't. But the truth is that God never lies, and so this text requires also that he never repents. In addition, the contrast with men who change their minds (also in 1 Sam. 15:29) would suggest that, since men sometimes do what they say and sometimes change their minds, God, unlike men, never changes his mind. Again, God cannot be different from men if it turns out that his behavior is just like theirs. So, unlike men, God never changes his mind. Amazingly, Numbers 23:19 and I Samuel 15:29 argue in parallel fashion, both excluding from God the possibility of any true change of mind.

It has been suggested that Hosea 11: 8 -9 actually teaches something quite to the contrary of what I have been arguing here. These verses, it is argued, should be taken to say that God changes his mind because he is not like a man. The text of Hosea 11:8-9 reads:

How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I surrender you, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I treat you like Zebollm?
My heart is turned over within Me,
All My compassions are kindled.
I will not execute My fierce anger;
I will not destroy Ephraim again.
For I am God and not man,
the Holy One in your midst,
And I will not come in wrath.

In responding to an earlier discussion I offered of the divine non- repentance texts, and commenting on this text, John Sanders writes,

. . . Ware's own criterion [definition of anthropomorphism given above] becomes problematic when put into use because Hosea 11:8-9 says God repents because he is not human. According to Ware's own criterion, when the Bible predicates something of God and this predication is accompanied by the "transcendent" ground that God "is not human," then we have the literal truth about God. Following Ware we have a real problem on our hands because the Bible teaches both (1) that God cannot change his mind because he is not human and (2) that God literally does change his mind because he is not human.

Unfortunately for Sanders' criticism, Hosea 11:8-9 does not teach that God has changed his mind, and certainly it does not teach that unlike humans God does change his mind! Rather, it affirms that God, unlike humans, is absolutely faithful to his covenant promises. As God says through the prophet,

For I am God and not man,
the Holy One in your midst,
And I will not come in wrath.

The point is that, unlike humans, God will faithfully do what he previously pledged to Israel. He will not ultimately destroy them (**come in wrath**); he will be merciful (see Malachi 3:6 for a similar pledge based on God's immutable promise). So, contrary to Sanders' interpretation, Hosea 11:8-9 does not teach that "God repents because he is not human," but rather that God will not judge them utterly because, unlike humans, he always keeps his promises. Concerning this text, Thomas McComiskey writes that:

[t]he emphasis is on the fact that God will not destroy his people a second time. Yahweh's refusal to execute his wrath must mean that he will not execute it to its fullest intensity.... Such an action [full or final judgment] would vitiate the ancient promise given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-7; see Lev. 26:44).... The reason that Yahweh will not give up his people is that he is God, not man. This contrast between the divine and human is not one of power, but of moral purity. This verse describes Yahweh as the Holy One; it is thus similar to Numbers 23:19 which states that **God is not .like man in that God does not lie.**

Far from conflicting with 1 Samuel 15:29 and Numbers 23:19, this reassuring promise in Hosea 11:8-9 agrees fully with those passages. All three actually contribute a varied yet uniform testimony to the fact that the Creator God, who is not a man, is, in himself and his own actions, above the moral lapses and changeability of character and purpose that characterize the world of humanity. Scripture, then, does in fact present God as transcending the human and finite qualities of changeability that it elsewhere attributes to him. We have a legitimate basis for interpreting the divine repentance texts as fundamentally anthropomorphic, and we would be wrong not to do so, just as we would be wrong to think of God as having eyes and hands.

But what do the divine repentance statements of Scripture mean? If they are anthropomorphic, they nonetheless convey a meaning, albeit not the meaning that God literally changes his mind. I believe it is best to see all of these texts as expressing two related notions, and in many cases, a third idea is also present.

First, when God is said to repent, it indicates

- (1) his awareness that the human situation has altered and
- (2) his desire to act in a way fitting to this changed situation.

In Exodus 32:14, God was aware of and took into account the urgent prayer of Moses. In 1 Samuel 15:11 and 35, God was aware of and took into account the failure of Saul. In no cases of the divine repentance is it necessary to go further than this and say that God learned something new by this changed situation. Rather, these expressions of repentance may indicate more narrowly that God was aware of what had changed and chose to act in accordance with this new situation. His awareness and choice to act accordingly may have been from eternity, yet he interacted in the temporal and existential flow of developing and changing human situations.

Although all human analogies ultimately fail, this may be thought of as being like the situation in which an engaged couple anticipates and plans for the moment when they are officially joined in matrimony. Although both have "known" (i.e., both have had strong, even compelling, beliefs regarding their upcoming marriage to each other) for months where, when, and whom they would marry, and likewise both have "known" the changed situation that will result the moment they are declared husband and wife, yet in the actual moment of their marriage union, their thoughts toward each other "change." Though their union as husband and wife was anticipated fully and "known in advance," as it were, the changed situation (i.e., now being actually married to each other) results in "changed" thoughts and attitudes toward each other. The point of the analogy, simply, is to indicate that although God can know and anticipate some future changed situation (e.g., Moses' prayer, Saul's failure) and can know and plan how he would correspondingly respond (e.g., forestall judgment, remove Saul as king), in the moment these changes take place, he may be said to "change" in respect to that situation as he relates to it differently than he previously indicated he would.

Second, when God is said to repent, it indicates his real experience, in historically unfolding relationships with people, of changed dispositions or emotions in relation to some changed human situation. Just because God knows in advance that some event will occur, this does not preclude God from experiencing appropriate emotions and expressing appropriate reactions when it actually happens. So, although God may have known that the world would become morally corrupt (Gen. 6:5-6), that Nineveh would repent (Jonah 3:5-10), that Moses would plead for his people (Ex. 32:11-14), and that Saul would fall as king (1 Sam. 13:8-14; 15:1-9), nonetheless God may experience internally and express outwardly appropriate moral responses to these changed situations when they occur in history. That is, he may literally change in emotional disposition and become angry over increasing moral evil and flagrant disobedience, or he may show mercy in relation to repentance or urgent prayer. And, this may occur in historical interaction with his human creatures even though he knows, from eternity past, precisely what would occur and what his response would be.

Again, analogies fall. Nevertheless, this situation is like the experience of a mother who takes her eight-year-old daughter to the dentist's office for her first filling. The mother, with her vast experience of such procedures, may "know" exactly what will happen and anticipate each step of the process. Yet, as she sits beside her daughter, who is reclining fearfully and tearfully in the dentist's chair, and as she observes the dentist intensely at work, she may feel distress, anguish, even pain as she stares into the frightened and confused eyes of her precious little girl. The fact that she "knew" previously everything that would occur did not preclude her from entering into the existential situation, feeling genuine and heartfelt pity. So too with God. While he can know everything about some future situation, he also may enter fully into the existential unfolding of that situation and respond appropriately, changing in emotion and disposition in a way fitting the changed situation itself.

Third, some texts also display a very important interpersonal dynamic that utilizes the concept of the divine repentance. 21 There are many cases where one wonders why God even told his prophet or the people what he intended to do. For example, with Nineveh, in light of its wickedness, why did God not simply destroy the city without giving Nineveh a forty-day period of suspended judgment, and without sending Jonah to tell them that they had these forty days? Or in Exodus 32, when God observed the people of Israel worshipping the golden calf, why did God

not simply destroy the people instead of first telling Moses concerning both their great sin and his intent to vent his anger against them? Since God surely could have acted directly and unilaterally, he purposely chose to involve others in the situation, thus purposely postponing the action he otherwise would have taken. What this allows for, perhaps even invites, is the response of the people who become informed of God's stated intentions. So, when the people of Nineveh hear, they repent. When Moses hears, he earnestly prays. It appears, then, that God's purpose is to involve others, planning that he will "change" when they have acted in the ways he anticipated they would and gave opportunity for them to do.

The change, then, is a real change in the narrow sense but not in the broad sense. That is, in the narrow sense, God really does do something different than he first said. Nineveh is shown mercy when they repent, which is a change from God's stated intention to destroy them. God postponed the destruction he stated he would bring on Israel when Moses interceded earnestly for them. In both cases (and in other similar cases), the specifically stated intention of God changed, without question. But, the fact that God told them of his stated intention suggests that he was inviting them to respond. As they responded, God carried out the broader purposes he had planned from the outset. The broader purposes include God telling others in order to elicit their response. Since the response of the people is part of what God intends, it appears that his "changed" course of action is the one he intended all along.

Perhaps the situation is a bit like a father who decides to surprise his teenage son with an outing to see his favorite baseball team play an early-evening game. His son has been hard at work since early morning preparing their garden for planting and getting their lawn in shape, and by this point in the day, he is obviously very tired and ready for some rest. As the father approaches his weary son, he grabs a few lawn tools from the garage and says with enthusiasm, "I thought I would join you back here so we could get in three or four more hours of good work!" Upon hearing this, the son responds by telling his dad that, although he's pretty worn out and hungry from laboring so hard, he'd be happy to keep on working for a few more hours, if this is what his father wants. In response, the father looks back at his son, and with a smile says, "How about instead you and I head for the baseball stadium? We'll catch the evening game and get some hot dogs and peanuts as soon as we get to the park!" The much relieved and deeply grateful son thanks his dad and the two of them get ready to head to the game. The father clearly has "changed" what he had just stated that he and his son would do. Instead of staying home and working together in the yard, they go to the game. Yet inwardly the father's intention from the outset was to take his hardworking son to the game. The manner in which he accomplished this goal, however, involved his son's willing response to continue working as part of the background for announcing his real intention of taking his son to the game. So, in the narrow sense, the father changed course from his stated intention. But in the broad sense, he fulfilled exactly what he had secretly intended all along. But notice: The father only fulfilled this broad intention in the way that he chose by involving his son and through the response of his son.

While the above story is only an analogy, nonetheless it appears that the book of Jonah gives us a clue that something akin to the situation described above is occurring here. In Jonah 4:2 we learn that the reason Jonah did not want to obey God's call and go to Nineveh in the first place is because he feared that God would be merciful. How odd, one might think, when the message God gave Jonah was, **Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown** (Jonah 3:4). Given that Jonah wanted calamity to come on the city, one would have thought that he would be delighted to bring this message of impending doom to the despised Ninevites. But, he wasn't. And why is this? Evidently Jonah suspected from the outset that God had a secret intention that was different from his stated intention. That God would send Jonah to tell them of this coming destruction, and that God would give them forty days' warning—all of this together indicated to Jonah that God's real intention was to save the city. Only this will explain Jonah's reluctance to go, given that the message he proclaimed to them was one, formally, with which he would have been quite happy. On this reading, God surely did change in the narrow sense, in that God's explicitly stated intention (**forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown**) changed as God had mercy on the

repentant Ninevites. But, given Jonah's reluctance to go in the first place, it appears we are to understand that God did not change at all in the broad sense. God's secret intention was to show mercy to Nineveh (which Jonah suspected), and God accomplished this intention exactly as he had purposed, but he accomplished it through Jonah's warning of the Ninevites and the repentance that the warning elicited.

It may be helpful to consider one other repentance text. A favorite example among open theists of God's supposed literal change of mind is the lengthening of Hezekiah's life, recorded in 2 Kings 20:1. We read that Hezekiah became mortally ill, and the Lord said to him,

Set your house in order, for you shall die and not live.
[2 Kings 20:1]

At this news, and with tears and great earnestness, Hezekiah fervently prayed, and the Lord responded, saying,

I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; behold, and I will heal you.... I will add fifteen years to your life.
[2 Kings 20:5-6]

Consider a few factors in regard to this remarkable account.

First, here is another example in which God simply could have acted directly and in accordance with his stated intention (**you shall die and not live**) without a word to Hezekiah. By simply not healing Hezekiah, God would thereby bring him to a speedy death. He did not have to tell Hezekiah that this would occur, but he did! So, one must wonder why God purposely spoke through Isaiah to let Hezekiah know his stated intention. Is it not entirely conceivable that God's purpose behind these words to Hezekiah was in fact to elicit from him such earnest, heartfelt dependence on God in prayer? After all, would it not be natural and expected for anyone, upon hearing that he was about to die, to plead with God to spare his life? And might God not have known and expected that Hezekiah would respond in just this way? Would not this give God an opportunity to demonstrate to Hezekiah his love for him by granting his earnest request? But cannot all of this be true while conceiving that God used his stated intention through Isaiah (**you shall die and not live**) in order to accomplish his real intention. **I will heal you.... I will add fifteen years to your life** by eliciting Hezekiah's prayer and then granting him this longed-for extended life?

Second, God granted to Hezekiah fifteen years of extended life-not two, not twenty, and certainly not "we'll both see how long you live," but fifteen years exactly. Does it not seem a bit odd that this favorite text of open theists, which purportedly demonstrates that God does not know the future and so changes his mind when Hezekiah prays, also shows that God knows precisely and exactly how much longer Hezekiah will live? On openness grounds, how could God know this? Over a fifteen-year time span, the contingencies are staggering! The number of future freewill choices, made by Hezekiah and by innumerable others, that relate directly to Hezekiah's life and well being, none of which God knows (in the openness view), is enormous. As we shall see in a discussion on divine guidance later in the book, open theists are quite honest and forthright about not recommending that we ask God's guidance for the distant future." Because, in the openness view, there are so many variables, so much of which God is absolutely ignorant, so few things God can know for sure of human lives and situations the further one projects into the future, it is inconceivable that God could know and predict exactly this fifteen-year extension of life to Hezekiah-inconceivable, that is, so long as God keeps the libertarian freedom of Hezekiah and innumerable others with whom he relates intact over the span of these years. Yet, God says, **"I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of**

Assyria; and I will defend this city for My own sake and for My servant David's sake" (2 Kings 20:6). With absolute confidence and assurance, God promises and predicts. Does not this expression of God's certain knowledge of the future cause one to question whether the openness interpretation of the added fifteen years is correct? Surely the most compelling overall understanding of this story is to see God's earlier statement that Hezekiah would die as a tool he uses to bring great joy to Hezekiah, as God now does what he intended all along. Fifteen years exactly, no fewer, no more. God has not literally changed his mind, for he knows the future and carries out his purposes.

Third, it appears that even if we grant an openness perspective, it is highly doubtful that God's granting Hezekiah fifteen additional years actually constituted a literal change of mind for God. Recall the theme in open theism that God knows us better than we know ourselves, that he knows every detail of our inner lives, and that he can predict with amazing accuracy the kinds of ways we will act and react. Certainly, knowing Hezekiah as God did (i.e., perfectly), and knowing, as mentioned above, how almost anyone would greet the news of his or her impending death, even on openness grounds it is hard to see how Hezekiah's response could have taken God by surprise. And if the response didn't taken him by surprise, then it is also hard to see how God really changed his mind when he added the fifteen years to Hezekiah's life. Would not God have fully anticipated Hezekiah's agonizing plea? And if so, would not God have already planned and known what he would do next? It is highly doubtful, then, even on openness grounds, that this constituted a literal change of mind on God's part.

It seems clear that the divine repentance, in such cases, functions as part of a tool for eliciting a dynamic relationship with people, a means of drawing out responses which God uses, then, to accomplish his ultimate purposes. These texts are wrongly used to indicate that God learned something new. Since we have strong biblical basis by which to affirm of God that he cannot change his mind (the LORD is not a man who should change his mind . . .), and since the purposes of these repentance texts can be fully explained apart from attributing to God what Scripture elsewhere denies of him (literal change of mind), we have compelling reason to deny that these texts teach that God literally changes his mind.

But if all this is true, can what these passages describe about God really be called "repentance"? Yes, it can be true repentance, of a sort, while it differs altogether from ways in which humans may often repent (remember, God is not a man that he should repent). Commenting on repentance texts such as I Samuel 15:11, John Piper offers this helpful explanation:

So my alternative way of thinking about these texts is: God foreknows the grievous and sorrowful effects of some of his own choices—for example, to create Adam and Eve, and to make Saul king. These effects are genuinely grievous to God as he sees them in themselves. Yet he does not regard his choices as mistakes that he would do differently if only he foreknew what was coming. Rather, he wills to do some things which he then genuinely grieves over in part when the grievous effect comes to pass.

Now if someone should say, This does not sound like what we ordinarily mean by "regret" or "repentance," I would respond that this is exactly what Samuel said: God **will not lie or repent; for he is not a man, that he should repent** (1 Sam. 15:29). In other words, Samuel means something like this: when I say "[God] repented that he made Saul king" (or when Moses said that God repented that he created Adam and Eve), I do not mean that God experiences repentance precisely the way ordinary humans do. He is not a man to experience "repentance" this way. He experiences it his way—the way one experiences "repentance" when one is all wise and foreknows the entire future perfectly. The experience is real, but it is not like finite man experiences it.

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conclusion

We have endeavored to demonstrate that neither the divine growth-in- knowledge texts nor the repentance texts imply that God has learned something he did not previously know. All of the passages put forth by open theists as support for God's limited knowledge, particularly of future contingencies and future free actions, can be explained in entirely reasonable and more compelling ways which show that their "straightforward" meanings are not the intended and correct meanings of those passages. In addition, we have seen that, in several cases, if the straightforward hermeneutic of open theism were to be applied to other growth-in-knowledge texts, we would be required to deny God's exhaustive knowledge both of the past and of the present, as well as his omnipresence. Clearly, the openness approach is deeply troubled, and we have serious reason to question it.

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Recommended Reading:

Contours of Christian Theology (IVP)
The Providence of God by Paul Helm

Systematic Theology
Louis Berkhof