

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Does God Make Mistakes?

JOHN PIPER

A Response to Greg Boyd's Treatment of Jeremiah 3:6-7, 19-20

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I deal with Dr. Boyd's interpretation of Jeremiah 3:6-7, 19-20 as an example of the kind of difficulties he gets into, even though he claims to be following a simple, face-value hermeneutic. He gives the impression that, on the face of it, this text, and many others, are clear and simple illustrations of God's openness to an uncertain future. But on careful examination, his own interpretation involves problems even greater than the traditional one he rejects.

On pages 12-14 of his unpublished paper, "The Bible and the Open View of the Future" (quoted with permission), Dr. Boyd deals with Jeremiah 3:6-7 and 3:19-20 under the heading, "The Disappointed God." It seems to me that in this section he comes as close as anywhere to saying that God, in his uncertainty about our future choices, actually makes mistakes in what he says about the future. Dr. Boyd clearly denies that God makes mistakes. But the question is: does his handling of these texts undermine that denial? Here is the key section. His words are indented, and my comments are inserted with footnotes.

There are many other ways in which the Bible portrays God as facing an open future.¹ Here the frustration of the Lord, for example, as he expresses his amazement at the stubbornness of Israel:

¹ Keep in mind when reading Boyd's material that he often speaks of the future being "somewhat open." The word "somewhat" seems to me to be a misleading word in that it implies that there are not very many future events that God is uncertain of. But this is not so. Boyd's exegesis reveals that he sees all truly free acts of his creatures as uncertain to God. The ones that God is not uncertain of are the ones he controls. But those are, on Boyd's definition, not free. There are comparatively few of these, compared to the vast freedom that God had bestowed on his creation. Therefore the openness of the future is very large.

If you allow yourself just to ponder the magnitude of the number of choices that are happening at every moment all over the world, the openness (= uncertainty to God) of the future is immeasurably great. Boyd has disapproved of this picture when I have expressed it to him. He compares the billions of free choices that involve real human spontaneity (and therefore uncertainty to God) to the natural world of quantum physics: "On one level there is a 'sea of uncertainty' regarding (say) the computer screen you're working on. There are billions of spontaneous quantum particles acting unpredictably as you read

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The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah: Have you seen what she [Israel] did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and played the whore there? (7) And I *thought*,² "After she has done all this she will return ... to me"; but she did not return ... (Jeremiah 3:6-7).

And again: I *thought*³ how I would set you among my children, and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful heritage of all the nations. And I *thought*⁴ you would call me, My Father, and would not turn from following me. (20) Instead, as a faithless wife leaves her husband, so you have been faithless to me, O house of Israel. (Jeremiah 3:19-20 emphasis added)

The obvious question that cries out for an answer is this: if the Lord has eternally foreknown in exhaustive detail every event that shall ever transpire, how is it possible that the Lord is speaking forthrightly in this passage? How could the Lord genuinely think that Israel would do one thing if in fact he eternally foreknew that Israel would not do this?⁵ Nor can this passage possibly be explained away as an

this. But are you not perfectly certain that the screen will continue to exist?" In other words, the uncertainty of God about the billions of choices that are being made each day does not mean he does not have a firm sense of how the whole will turn out. Nevertheless, be careful to realize that when you hear him say that the future is "somewhat" open, he has in his mind a very nuanced and sophisticated understanding of how the massive openness of all free actions relates to the general certainties that God has about the big picture.

² The Hebrew word here is not "I thought" but "I said" (*rm; aow*). I have pointed this out to Dr. Boyd, but he continues to use this translation in subsequent publications (God of the Possible), and says that the observation does not help the cause of the traditional view. Perhaps. But I think, by keeping the more literal translation ("I said"), we leave open the possibility that God may be saying something about what Israel will do which, at a deeper level, he knows ("thinks") she will not do. For example, he may be saying: "Israel will return to me [with the tacit assumption: 'by all outward appearances and ordinary human expectations']," but may know and "think" that she will, in fact, not return, contrary to all outward appearances and ordinary human expectations. It's the tacit assumption that keeps his prediction from being a falsehood. See note 5 below.

³ These italics are Dr. Boyd's and draw undue attention to the word "thought" which is not an accurate translation. See note 2

⁴ These italics are Dr. Boyd's and draw undue attention to the word "thought" which is not an accurate translation. See note 2.

⁵ Dr. Boyd asks, "How could the Lord genuinely think that Israel would do one thing if in fact he eternally foreknew the Israel would not do this?" Boyd and the rest of us face the same problem here: How shall God not be seen as making a mistake in what he says? In verse 7, God says, "I said, 'After she has done all this she will return ...' But she did not return." In verses 19-20, God says, "I said, 'You will ... not turn from following me.' Instead ... you have been faithless to me." Now, on the surface it appears that God was wrong in both verses, if you simply take the words with no assumptions about what might be implicit in God's intention.

Boyd's explanation is that God did not know how the people would in fact act. That is certainly one way to understand the text. Another way is to say that when God said, "She will return," or, "You will not

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anthropomorphism, for the passage has nothing to do with how things appeared; it is the Lord telling us something about his subjective state. This self-revealing expression of disappointment from the Lord, I hold, can only be accepted as authentic if we understand that the future is partly a realm of possibilities and probabilities, not settled certainties.

On this view, the Lord can be heard as expressing his surprise at the improbable happening. He genuinely thought his people would behave differently.⁶ If EDF

turn from following me," he had in mind implicit conditions on his statements of expectation. For example, he may have meant: "She will return to me, if the ordinary human expectations under these conditions occur." In other words, "So many helpful influences toward repentance have been given that it would be fully expected that a human, acting reasonably, would turn to the Lord." Or in the case of verse 19, God may have meant, "She will return to me, by all appearances." In other words, all the outward factors have been put in place to make her turning to me eminently reasonable and humanly expected.

What we are saying is that one solution to this apparent mistake on God's part is to treat it the way most commentators treat God's prophecy over Nineveh: "Yet forty days and Nineveh will be overthrown" (Jonah 3:4). But Nineveh repented and was not overthrown. The solution here is that God implicitly intended the condition: "Nineveh will be overthrown, unless she repents." Similarly here in Jeremiah 3:7 and 19-20 God says, without explicit conditions, "She will return," and, "You will not turn from following me." Conceivably these predictions may be absolute and unqualified (and thus God be mistaken); or they may be conditional and implicitly qualified, as in Jonah and other places.

⁶ Consider this statement carefully: "[God] genuinely thought his people would behave differently." How can Dr. Boyd not view this statement as imputing a mistake to God? Two sentences later Dr. Boyd states the situation slightly differently, revealing the unease of saying that one of God's "thoughts" about the future was wrong. He says, "The Lord thinks one thing will most likely occur while it turns out that something else occurred" (*italics added*). Here he inserts the words "most likely" to show that God was really expressing a probability judgment, not a factual certainty when he said, in verses 7 and 20, "She will return," and, "You will not turn from following me." They sound like absolute factual predictions, but, Dr. Boyd now implies, they are "what would most likely occur." In other words, Boyd must qualify the words of God to rescue them from error in a way similar to our own qualifications. We both have the same problem, but we are solving it in different ways. The question is, which qualification did God have in mind: was he admitting that he did not know the future, and so expressing a probability judgment which does not sound like a probability judgment, and which seems to be mistaken? Or was he possessing perfect future knowledge of what would happen, and expressing what the people would and should do, given ordinary human appearances and expectations?

To answer this, one might appeal to other passages of Scripture concerning the foreknowledge of God. Or one might appeal to Jeremiah himself in the immediate and wider context. For example, in verse 17 God predicts that the day is coming when his people will not be faithless any more: "They will call Jerusalem 'The Throne of the LORD,' . . . nor will they walk anymore after the stubbornness of their evil heart." In other words, the very faithlessness that God laments, he will one day overcome, as the new covenant promises teach in Jeremiah 31:33-34. This would suggest that God's way of relating to future human choices is not such that he cannot render them certain and still accountable. Or one could look at Jeremiah 10:23, which says, "I know, O LORD, that a man's way is not in himself, Nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps." This would at least give one pause about thinking that man's ways are so independent of God's providence that he does not know what is coming. Or one could ponder how Dr.

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[exhaustive definite foreknowledge] is true, however, then there are no real possibilities or probabilities for God, for all is eternally certain. And this means that there never can be a situation where the Lord thinks one thing will most likely occur while it turns out that something else occurred. Unfortunately from the EDF perspective, however, just this is what the Lord explicitly tells us happened in Jeremiah 3:6-7 and 19-20

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[Here Dr. Boyd inserts a very important footnote:] Passages such as this need not imply that God was caught off guard as it were, as though he didn't anticipate the possibility of the improbable.⁷ Nor do they imply that God was mistaken in thinking people would do one thing when it turns out they do another. If God knows the whole of reality exhaustively, he eternally knows all future possibilities with their various probabilities, for these are objective realities from all eternity. From all eternity, for example, it was logically possible that God would create a world such that just the situation described in this passage would transpire. God would, then, eternally know this. And from all eternity it was logically possible (and indeed most probable) that in this situation his people would respond positively to the Lord's leading. But it was from all eternity also logically possible (though relatively improbable) that in this exact same situation his people would not respond positively. The Lord, having a perfectly accurate assessment of all probabilities, thought his people would do the former when this situation came about.⁸ But many of his people, being self-determining free creatures, opted for the

Boyd tries to avoid imputing error to God, given his way of handling the text, to see if this offers a more plausible, less difficult way of construing God's words. See note 7.

⁷ Note carefully what he says. He does not say that God was not caught off guard. He says that God was not "caught off guard as it were, as though he didn't anticipate the possibility of the improbable" (emphasis added). In other words: God knows all possibilities including the most improbable. Thus, any time an event happens, God knows ahead of time that it might happen. But God is not able to discern which, of all the possibilities that he knows, will, in fact, come to pass. He makes the best judgment he can, and it can prove different than what he expected. I say "different than what he expected" rather than "mistaken" because Dr. Boyd firmly denies that God can be mistaken. But here he seems to stretch words to the breaking point. The statement, "[God] genuinely thought his people would behave differently [than they did]," surely sounds like what we usually mean by a mistake. But Dr. Boyd does not call it a mistake because it was the best judgment God could make, given all the known factors. And (on his definition, it seems) a good judgment in view of all known factors is not a "mistake," even if it turns out to be contrary to the future facts.

⁸ Here is another telling sentence: "The Lord, having a perfectly accurate assessment of all probabilities, thought his people would do the former when this situation came about." But they did not do what God's "perfectly accurate assessment of all probabilities" caused him to predict. Here is the raw reality of Dr. Boyd's position. It is a position that tries to rescue the attributes of "perfection" and "accuracy" from the sea of uncertainty into which God stares each day; but his position can only rescue God's perfection and accuracy by saying they yield predictions that turn out contrary to fact. God says that the people will

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more improbable course of action. Hence the Lord's surprise in this passage. Still, he was not caught off guard. Nor was he mistaken in his original expectation that his behavior would most likely⁹ cause his people to follow him.

[John Piper \(@JohnPiper\)](#) is founder and teacher of [desiringGod.org](#) and chancellor of Bethlehem College & Seminary. For 33 years, he served as pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota. He is author of [more than 50 books](#), including [Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist](#) and most recently [Providence](#).

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return, and they do not return, to his surprise and disappointment. One must ask: what is the glory of a "perfectly accurate assessment of all probabilities" which yields judgments and decisions about the future that do not correspond to reality when it arrives?

Think carefully here: one of the ways that Dr. Boyd escapes the implication that God does not have the comforting ability to plan well for our future, is the argument that, while God does not have certainty about the choices that I, or people around me, will make, he does have "perfectly accurate assessment of all probabilities." That is supposed to comfort me and assure me that he can make good plans and bring about his purposes. But notice that this comfort seems to be taken away in Boyd's footnote, when it says that, in spite of God's "perfectly accurate assessment of all probabilities," nevertheless, "many of his people, being self-determining free creatures, opted for the more improbable course of action." That is, they brought about a state of affairs that God's "perfectly accurate assessment of all probabilities" could not foresee. So the comfort that God's perfect knowledge of human probabilities is supposed to give is greatly diminished.

⁹ Notice that, as in note 6 above, Dr. Boyd adds the words, "most likely." God was not "mistaken in his original expectation that his behavior would most likely cause his people to follow him." But this statement of Dr. Boyd is not true unless one qualifies the words "most likely." For his peoples' following him was not the most likely future possibility, since it did not come about. Another behavior was, in fact, more likely, namely, the one that came about. Evidently, what Dr. Boyd really means is this: God's peoples' following him was "most likely, given ordinary human expectations in view of all that God had done for this people." In other words, in the end, Dr. Boyd has to make a qualification similar to the one we suggested above in note 5. So if our two interpretations must both assume an implicit qualification, at least the more traditional interpretation does not labor under the added difficulty of imputing ignorance and (unintentionally) even error (by ordinary definition) to God.