

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Does the Bible Affirm Open Theism?

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Open theists, such as Clark Pinnock, John Sanders, Gregory Boyd, and William Hasker, seek to do justice to the “give and take” in Scripture between God and human beings. For example, in [Ex. 32:7-10](#), God tells Moses he will destroy Israel for worshipping the golden calf and raise up a new nation from Moses himself. Moses intercedes, however, and in verse 14 God “relents.” God also seems to “change his mind” in [Isa. 38:1-5](#), where Isaiah prophesies that King Hezekiah will die, but in response to Hezekiah’s repentance adds fifteen years to his life, and in Jonah 3-4, where God retracts an announcement of judgment in response to Ninevah’s repentance.

From these and other such passages, the open theists infer that God is a temporal being (not “above time” as in much traditional theology), that he changes his mind, that his plans are influenced by creatures, that he sometimes regrets actions that he has performed (as [Gen. 6:6](#)), and that he does not have exhaustive knowledge of the future. On their view, God’s regretting and relenting come about because human free decisions are utterly undetermined and unpredictable. So God must adjust his plans to the free choices of human beings.

We should not ignore these “relenting” passages. On the other hand, we should not forget either the pervasive biblical emphasis on God’s sovereign control of the world and his exhaustive knowledge of past, present, and future. God brings about natural events ([Psm. 65:9-11](#), [135:5-7](#)), even apparently random ones ([Prov. 16:33](#)). He controls the smallest details of nature ([Matt. 10:29-30](#)). He governs human history ([Acts 17:26](#), [Isa. 10:5-12](#), [14:24-27](#)). If someone dies accidentally, it is because “the Lord lets it happen” ([Ex. 21:12-13](#)). Contrary to open theism, God brings about human free decisions, even sinful ones ([Gen. 45:5-8](#), [Judg. 14:4](#), [2 Sam. 24](#), [Isa. 44:28](#), [Luke 22:22](#), [Acts 2:23-24](#), [Rev. 17:17](#)). He hardened Pharaoh’s heart ([Ex. 4:21](#), [7:3](#)), and others as well ([Deut. 2:30](#), [Josh. 11:18-20](#), [1 Sam. 2:25](#), [2 Chron. 25:20](#)), for his own purposes ([Rom. 9:17](#)). He is also the source of human faith ([John 6:37](#), [44](#), [65](#), [Eph. 2:4-10](#), [2 Tim. 1:9](#), [Acts 13:48](#), [16:14-15](#), [18:27](#)) and repentance ([Zech. 12:10](#), [Acts 5:31](#), [11:18](#)). So human freedom is not indeterminate as open theists maintain. We are free in that we do what we want to do; but behind our plans and desires are those of God ([James 4:13-17](#)).

In general, God “works out everything in conformity to the purpose of his will” ([Eph. 1:11](#); cf. [Lam. 3:37-38](#), [Rom. 2:28](#), [11:33-36](#)). And God cannot fail at anything he seeks to do ([Ps. 33:11](#), [115:3](#), [135:6](#), [Prov. 21:30](#), [Isa. 14:27](#), [43:13](#), [46:10](#), [55:11](#), [Dan. 4:35](#), [Rev. 3:7](#)).

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Since God controls everything, he knows everything, including the future. Knowing the future is a test of a true prophet ([Deut. 18:22](#)) and indeed of a true God ([Isa. 41:21-23](#), [42:9](#), [43:9-12](#), [44:7](#), [48:3-7](#)). Through his prophets, God often predicts the future centuries in advance (as [Gen. 9:26-27](#)). Contrary to the open theists, who think God cannot anticipate human free decisions, he often predicts human behavior in detail ([1 Sam. 10:1-7](#), [Jer. 37:6-11](#), [Matt. 26:34](#)). He predicts the behavior and character of human beings in the distant future ([1 Kings 13:1-4](#), [Isa. 44:28-45:13](#)).

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How then should we understand God's "relenting?" For one thing, God states as a general policy in [Jer. 18:5-10](#) that if he announces judgment and people repent, he will relent; similarly if he pronounces blessing and people do evil. In other words, relenting is part of God's unchanging plan, not a change forced on him by his ignorance. Further, God is not only transcendent, but immanent. He has dwelled on earth in the tabernacle and temple, in Christ, and in his general omnipresence ([Psm. 139:7-12](#)). When God interacts with people in time, he does one thing, then another. He curses, then blesses. His actions are in temporal sequence and therefore, in one sense, changing. But these changes are the outworking of God's eternal plan, which does not change.

It is important, then, to see God as working from both above and below, in eternity and time, not only in time as open theists propose.

For Further Reading

John M. Frame, *No Other God: a Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishers, 2001). A critique of open theism.

John Sanders, *The God Who Risks* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-varsity Press, 1998). A favorable exposition of openness theology.

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