

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Theological Problems with Open Theism

BRIAN G. CHILTON, PHD

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The current church finds itself in the midst of what is termed the *postmodern era*. John S. Feinberg states that the “differences between modern and postmodern epistemology are substantial, and they create major differences of approach to topics such as knowledge, truth, and objectivity.”¹ Dave Griffin says that the postmodern worldview “overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-worldview: it deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence.”² Feinberg rightly said that modern theologies tend to either “deify man or humanize God.”³ A recent theological system, called Open Theism, is an example of a worldview that seeks to demerit God to the level of a human.

Open Theists believe that the “future is ‘open’ not only for us but also for God—‘open’ because God has chosen not to control the decisions made by free rational creatures.”⁴ While this aspect may not be controversial to some, the real issue is found in that Open Theists “conclude that God’s foreknowledge is limited ... God does not know in advance what the outcome of any cooperatively produced effects will be.”⁵ Open



Theists use a few Old Testament passages to defend their case. First, God is said to have been “sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.”⁶ While

¹ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 96.

² David Griffin, “Introduction to SUNY Series in Constructive Postmodern Thought,” in Griffin, Beardslee, and Holland, *Varities of Postmodern Theology*, xii, in John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), 95.

³ Feinberg, 83.

⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, “The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism,” in *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives*, Bruce L. McCormack, ed (Grand Rapids, Scotland: Baker, Rutherford House, 2008), 190.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Genesis 6:6.

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the verse indicates God's emotional state, it says nothing about God's decision-making abilities or God's cognitive abilities. For instance, K. A. Mathews writes,

The tension between these characterizations of God partly lies in the diverse contexts in which "grieve/relent" occurs in the Bible. Genesis 6:6–7 is describing the emotional anguish of God; our verse does not present an abstract statement about God's decision making. This would be altogether out of place for the intention of the passage, which depicts God as wronged by the presumptuous sin of humanity. Moreover, the parameters of this verse have been dictated by the author's intention to imitate 5:29 with its distinctive vocabulary and mood. This is shown especially by the subsequent clause, where it describes God's heart as "filled with pain" (*yit 'aššēb*). This further echoes the painful consequences of human sin in the garden, where the cognate nouns narrate the "painful toil" the man and woman will endure (3:16–17; 5:29).⁷

Thus, the Open Theist misuses the text to appropriate their views of God's limited prescience when in fact the text is better associated with God's personal relationship with humanity.

A second passage is used to defend the Open Theist interpretation. In Jonah 3:10, one finds that "God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He has said that He would bring upon them, and He did not do it."⁸ The Open Theist would claim that this text definitely demonstrates that God changes His mind and, thus, does not know future events. However, this is certainly not so. The text does not indicate that God did not know that the Ninevites would repent; only that God changed the direction of their future from that of judgment to that of mercy. But the entire book of Jonah seems to indicate that God knew that this would be their fate from the beginning. Why else would God have gone to such great lengths to make sure that the people heard the message from the prophet Jonah? Therefore, just because God changed the future direction of the people from judgment to mercy does not weigh in on God's prescience in the least. In fact, that God knew their future and where they were headed indicates that God knew, at least in part, their future destiny. The Ninevites experienced a transfer



⁷ K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, vol. 1A, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 342.

⁸ Jonah 3:10.

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from judgment to mercy. In fact, Christians also benefit from this God's decision to transfer them from judgment to mercy.

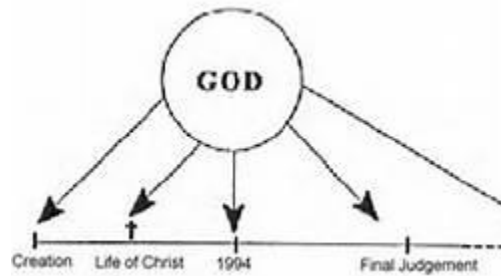


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While the Open Theist manipulates texts to bring forth their beliefs, far more passages of Scripture indicate openly and boldly the prescience, or foreknowledge, of God. For instance, David writes that “there is not a word on my tongue, but behold, O LORD, You know it altogether.”⁹ Paul writes even more explicitly that “we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be called the firstborn among many brethren.”¹⁰ God told Jeremiah “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you; before you were born I sanctified you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.”¹¹ Although many more texts exist that demonstrates God's foreknowledge, one has a strong case for divine foreknowledge from these three texts alone.

The modern church needs to be taught biblical systematic theology. By understanding the biblical teachings of God's being, God's essence, God's non-moral and moral attributes; the church will not fall for the postmodern ideologies and theologies that currently exist. In fact, the church will grow to appreciate the vastness of God's knowledge and power. Such knowledge will bring comfort and encouragement when nothing else can, because the biblical church will understand that the future belongs to God.

Bibliography

All Scripture, unless otherwise noted, comes from the *New King James Version*. Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1982.

⁹ Psalm 139:4.

¹⁰ Romans 8:28-29.

¹¹ Jeremiah 1:5.

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