



## The Foreknowledge of God Part 2

A Critique of Dr. Greg Boyd's Open Theism

by Bob DeWaay

In part 1 of this two-part series we examined a series of Scripture references that Dr. Greg Boyd cites as proof that God lacks comprehensive foreknowledge of the future choices of free moral agents. We did this in order to answer his challenge for someone to deal with his Biblical exegesis directly from the Scripture, as he claimed his critics have not done. In part two we shall continue this process and show that the passages Boyd cites do not support the claims of open theism.

### When God Expresses Surprise or Questions the Future

Dr. Boyd cites **Numbers 14:11** as evidence that the future is partially open: "*And 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?'*" Dr. Boyd's assumption is that God really does not know. He admits that this could be a rhetorical question, as when God questioned Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:8-9. Boyd's response to this explanation is interesting: "This is a possible interpretation, but not a necessary one."<sup>[1]</sup> The issue is not which possible interpretation could be given, but which one the context and reason

demand. Dr. Boyd then asserts: “[T]here is nothing in these texts or in the whole of Scripture that requires these questions to be rhetorical.”[\[2\]](#)

Frankly, I am surprised that Dr. Boyd would assert this. Let’s take **Numbers 14:11** and consider it carefully. The question “how long” is either rhetorical or a literal request for information. It can be shown to be used rhetorically in many places. For example: “*And Jesus answered and said, ‘O unbelieving and perverted generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring him here to Me’*” (**Matthew 17:17**). This cannot be a request for information; the gospels make it clear that Jesus knew what was soon to happen—that He would be rejected, crucified, raised from the dead, and ascend into heaven. This is a similar expression to that in **Numbers 14:11**. So it is clearly false that “nothing . . . in the whole of Scripture” requires these questions to be rhetorical.

Even more telling is the situation in the dialogue between God and Moses. Suppose “how long” was not rhetorical but a request for information. That would mean that God was asking Moses about the people’s future, persistent unbelief. If Dr. Boyd’s thesis is correct and God does not know the future choices of free moral agents, why would He expect Moses to know them? Surely God would know more about what the people are going to do than Moses would. So taking the “how long” as a literal question creates an absurdity. However, if we take it as rhetorical, the meaning is that God is grieved by the people’s unbelief and is expressing to Moses how unjustified their response to Him really was. Indeed, the context and the whole of Scripture does “require” this interpretation.

## When God Thought One Way and Reality Turned Out Differently

Another similar passage offered as proof of a partially open future is **Jeremiah 3:7**: “*And I thought, ‘After she has done all these things, she will return to Me’; but she did not return, and her treacherous sister Judah saw it.*”<sup>[3]</sup> If taken literally this passage would suggest God thought Israel would turn to Him but was wrong in so thinking. Boyd’s reasoning on this is important:

We need to ask ourselves seriously, how could the Lord honestly say he *thought* Israel would turn to him if he was always certain that they would never do so? If God tells us he thought something was going to occur while being eternally certain it would not occur, is he not lying to us?<sup>[4]</sup>

Since God cannot lie, the reasoning goes, He must not have known what Israel was going to do. This appears to be a problem for our belief in divine foreknowledge.

We can find help in this case by contemplating how human language commonly works and by examining other Scriptures. When we say, “I thought” to someone, we are not always speaking about cognitive facts as Dr. Boyd’s interpretation requires. Let me give you an example. My wife is out of town for a week visiting relatives. The last day before she comes home I scurry about and

clean up the house. Alas, I overlook some important points: the laundry has piled up all week and the bed has dirty, unchanged sheets. She says, "I thought you would have done the laundry and changed the sheets." Now as a matter of fact, given my nature and past experience, anyone given to betting would bet on the laundry not having been done and the sheets not having been changed. It was not that she did not know I would fail to do these things; she was expressing displeasure that she came home to such a pile of dirty laundry.

We use the phrase "I thought" in this very sense in many common situations. We say, "I thought drivers in this city would be more courteous," when in fact all the evidence has pointed to the fact that they would not be. We mean, "I think it would be better and morally right if drivers were more courteous." Thoughts and expectations often have moral connotations. Dr. Boyd writes, "In this case, God would be *wrong* for expecting one thing to occur when it was a settled fact that another thing was certainly going to occur."<sup>[5]</sup> But this assumes we are talking about *factual* expectations and not *moral* ones. There is a big difference. Back to the example of driving in the city, I *always* expect to be treated courteously in a moral sense, but I *never* expect I will be in a factual sense when driving in rush hour.

Given this common use of the language, let's examine the Scripture in question. Did God expect factually, in Jeremiah's day, that the people were going to turn to him? Clearly He did not. He told Jeremiah many times that the people were rebellious, would not listen and were certainly going into captivity. Lest it be

objected that this was after the fact, God told Moses about it many centuries earlier:

*And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers; and this people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the land, into the midst of which they are going, and will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them. Then My anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide My face from them, and they shall be consumed, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them; so that they will say in that day, 'Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?'" (Deuteronomy 31:16, 17)*

But according to the open view of God, He genuinely thought that the people would be faithful to Him and their stubbornness was merely a remote possibility. Dr. Boyd writes, "Since God is omniscient, he always knew that it was remotely possible for his people to be this stubborn, for example. But he genuinely did not expect them to actualize this remote possibility."[\[6\]](#)

This shows what problems are engendered when we try to force a factual connotation on God's expressions of expectation when the context shows they have moral connotations. If God genuinely thought that Israel in Jeremiah's day was going to be faithful to Him, He would be a worse predictor than the casual reader of Scripture. Read the story of the wilderness wanderings, the period of

the Judges, the history of the various kings, the sad story of the split kingdom, the apostasy and destruction of the northern kingdom, the degeneration of whole-hearted worship of the true God despite brief periods of revival, and tell me when you get to Jeremiah's day that you literally "thought" faithfulness would surely happen and rebellion was only a remote possibility. The writers of Scripture have prepared us for just the opposite. So why would God literally think that Israel would be faithful, against all the evidence?

God knew with complete certainty what would transpire, and inspired His prophets to predict it. When He said "*I thought after all of this she would return to me,*" He is expressing His moral will. God always expects righteous and God-honoring responses from His creatures, although He rarely gets them. God is never wrong about the future and never is taken by surprise.

### **WHEN GOD SAYS "NOW I KNOW"**

Another key passage Dr. Boyd cites is **Genesis 22:12**, "*And he said, 'Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for **now I know** that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.'*"

The question before us is whether God literally did not know what Abraham's response would be until Abraham made it. Dr. Boyd writes, "The verse has no clear meaning if God was certain that Abraham would fear him before he offered up his son."[\[7\]](#) He then cites several other Old Testament passages where God tests Israel "to know" whether they would fear God and serve Him. He asserts

that these passages cannot be reconciled, “with the view that God eternally knows exactly what will be in the heart of a person to do.”[\[8\]](#)

If we had no other information about God, His nature, and His eternal purposes, we would have to grant that these passages seem to teach that God’s knowledge is growing, that God is learning things as history progresses. However, to claim that God did not know what Abraham would decide right up to the moment he lifted the knife, one would also have to claim that God does not know the heart. It would also require a view of the human will as being so autonomous as to be detached from any previous causes, inclinations, or influences (a view which was powerfully refuted by Jonathan Edwards). Why? Because if God knows everything, right up to the present moment, and also knows the thoughts and intents of the heart, then He knows everything that has causal effect on a human decision. Even if you do not believe in foreknowledge, God’s perfect knowledge of all present and past causes would be sufficient for you to know the effect in the case of Abraham.

In Abraham’s case, we have special “behind the scenes” information, supplied by the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures. “*He [Abraham] considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type*” (**Hebrews 11:19**). Abraham’s consideration that God is able to raise the dead must have existed before he lifted the knife, or else it would have had no bearing on his decision. For God literally not to know what Abraham would do, He would have had to be lacking knowledge of Abraham’s heart and faith, which the book of Hebrews says motivated Abraham’s

obedience. This view must be rejected based on the clear teachings of Scripture. God is said to know the heart: "*I, the Lord, search the heart, I test the mind*" (**Jeremiah 17:10a**). In **Acts 15:8** God is called the "heart-knower" in the Greek. In many passages He is said to judge according to the heart. Since God must have known Abraham's heart, and Abraham had faith in his heart that God could even raise the dead if necessary, God must have known what Abraham's decision would be. Therefore the clear teaching of Scripture demands that we do not take God's statement, "now I know" to be a literal declaration of previous ignorance.

What does it mean? We speak the same way. When a loving grandchild draws us a special picture and beams with joy as he gives it to us, we sometimes say, "how wonderful, now I know that you love me." Such a statement is not a confession of previous ignorance but rather a relational and appropriate loving response provided at the moment. It is a statement that expresses approval of the act. That is what God's statement to Abraham was. Many such statements are found in the Bible, such as God's interaction with Moses concerning Israel. Since in cases such as Abraham's we have enough information elsewhere in the Scripture to show what was going on, it seems absolutely reasonable to take other incidents the same way. God lovingly condescends to talk to humans in terms familiar to them and interacts with them on the scene of history as though He were experiencing time the same way we do. But the Bible clearly teaches that God's relationship to time is different than ours.



## CONCLUSION

I do not think Dr. Boyd has given us sufficient Biblical evidence to warrant changing our whole view of God's foreknowledge. The passages cited are incidental to the issue at hand. What I mean by this is that they do not specifically address God's relationship to time and whether or not God's knowledge is unchanging. There is no clear passage of Scripture that says God does not foreknow, while many state that He does. The passages we have examined, taken in their context, are easily understood without importing the notion of a God who lacks exhaustive foreknowledge. In several instances the Bible predicts what was going to happen in these very examples, showing that God **did** have foreknowledge. Therefore the "open" view of God should be rejected solely on Biblical grounds.

## End Notes

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[1] Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible — A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000) 59.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Cited *ibid.* 60. Jeremiah 3:19 is also cited as a similar example, but there is a translation issue, the NASB does not use “I thought” in this passage.

[4] *Ibid.* 60.

[5] *Ibid.* 61.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.* 64.

[8] *Ibid.* 65.

Critical Issues Commentary

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