

The Open View of God and Prophecy

The recent teaching about the open view of God, as it is being proposed among evangelicals, has caused many concerns on the part of traditional theists. At best, they see the viewpoint as being a distortion of the biblical view of God and, at worst, an abandonment of evangelical orthodoxy. Many presentations, both pro and con, have been given on this topic so a detailed and descriptive definition of the open view of God will not be explored formally in this paper.¹ In a previous article, this writer has reviewed the various designations and the resultant emphases of the open view of God.² The open view of God has been referred to as a belief in the **openness of God, open theism, relational theism, freewill theism, and neotheism**. For the purposes of this article, a working definition of the open view of God will be the following: *God is open to the possibilities of the future since His understanding of the future is partially, although not absolutely, contingent upon future human choices with the result that He does not know all future events with certainty since they have not happened yet.*

In light of this understanding of the nature of the God of the Bible, this article will look at the way that open theists handle prophetic passages in the Bible. Such a concern arises naturally for all evangelicals but especially for dispensational premillennialists who historically have shown a focus on eschatological issues. If God does not know the future until the future becomes today, on the surface at least, the expectation of believers with respect to the end time scenario appears to stand on shaky ground. Since a large portion of the Bible was prophecy when it was written, discussion of these issues cannot be regarded as secondary.

An Evaluation of The Ways Open Theists Handle Prophecy

Boyd responds to the general charge that open theists cannot account for biblical prophecy in the following way:

¹ Some works espousing the open view of God are Clark Pinnock, et al., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998); David Basinger, *The Case for Freewill Theism: A Philosophical Assessment* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996); and Gregory Boyd, *God of the Possible: A Biblical Introduction to the Open View of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000). Some works opposing the open view of God are Norman Geisler, *Creating God in the Image of Man?* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 1997); Bruce Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001); Robert Payne and Stephen R. Spencer, "A Critique of Free-Will Theism, Part One" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (July-September 2001): 259-86. Several articles from both sides have been published on the website of the Baptist General Conference, <http://www.bgcworld.org>.

² See upcoming article by Michael D. Stallard, "An Open View of God . . . Does He Change?" *Journal of Ministry and Theology* 5 (Fall 2001): 5-25. This paper was originally presented as a Faculty Forum paper at Baptist Bible Seminary in Spring 2001.

I affirm (because Scripture teaches) that God can and does determine and predict the future whenever it suits his sovereign purposes to do so. But I deny that this logically entails, or that Scripture teaches, that all of the future is determined and predictable. God is wise enough to be able to achieve his purposes while allowing his creatures a significant element of freedom.³

Boyd's basic idea is that God does predict, but not all things exhaustively. On the face of it, one can certainly argue that God has not predicted precisely all things about the future in the Bible. It remains to be seen, however, if such an idea actually leads to open theism.

More particularly Boyd uses the prophecy and teaching about the Second Coming of Christ as evidence that there is a partly open future, even from God's perspective. He comments "Peter suggests that God has delayed the Second Coming because he is '*patient with you, not wanting any to perish*' (2 Pet. 3:9). Peter then encourages believers to be '*looking for and hastening (speudo) the coming of the day of god [sic]*' (2 Pet. 3:12, NIV '*speed its coming*')."⁴ The implication from within Boyd's open theistic theology is that this passage shows an uncertain time for the Second Coming from God's point of view. Men can actually change the time when Jesus returns which means that God really does not know the time until it actually happens. In light of this unusual belief, it is necessary to do a thorough review of the many ways in which open theists handle prophetic passages.

Gregory Boyd's Categories of Prophecy

The evaluation will begin with Boyd's three categories for dealing with prophecy. Although these strategies may not exhaust all that Boyd says about this issue in his various writings, he neatly summarizes these three particular avenues.⁵ ***First, he affirms that many (if not most) prophecies are conditional.*** The impression he gives with his use of the words *many* and *if not most* is that this category covers most of the biblical prophecies. The idea of conditionality means that there is no absolute one-to-one relationship between prediction and fulfillment. Furthermore, Boyd believes that such an absolute view of prophetic passages is often inadequate even when the text says that God has stated the prophecy in a "settled" way.

One other aspect of the parameters that God establishes around nations, cities, and individuals needs to be mentioned. Scripture demonstrates that these parameters are often flexible. . . . the Lord tells us that even after he has prophesied for or against a nation, he will "change [his] mind" if the nation changes (Jer. 18:1-12). We find many examples of this "changing" occurring at national and individual levels. Thus, even when the Lord announces that some aspect of the future is settled, it may still be

³ Gregory Boyd, "God and the Future: A Brief Outline of the Open View," available from <http://www.bgc.bethel.edu/4know/future.htm>; Internet; accessed January 17, 2001, p. 3. Page numbers in this and future website references are standard website printed pages.

⁴ Gregory Boyd, "The 'Open' View of the Future," available from <http://www.bgc.bethel.edu/4know/openvw.htm>; Internet; accessed January 17, 2001, p. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7. The discussion to follow will highlight Boyd's summary and the Bible passages he uses.

alterable. The “settledness” may be conditioned on unsettled factors, such as decisions we make.

What this shows us is that not only is part of the future open, but also some aspects of the future that God has announced as settled are to some extent open. God’s mind can yet be changed, a biblical truth that is difficult to square with the classical view of divine foreknowledge.⁶

Boyd’s example from Jeremiah 18:1-12 is the potter and clay object lesson. God speaks to Israel through Jeremiah:

‘Can I not, O house of Israel, deal with you as this potter does?’ declares the LORD. ‘Behold, like the clay in the potter’s hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel. At one moment I might speak concerning a nation or concerning a kingdom to uproot, to pull down, or to destroy it, if that nation against which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent concerning the calamity I planned to bring on it’ (Jer. 18:6-8; NASB).

Boyd refers to this passage as perhaps the best biblical example of God changing His mind or adjusting to circumstances, i.e., “depending upon what does or does not take place.”⁷ His understanding of what this prophecy means to classical theism is clear.

Biblical authors don’t generally assume that God’s declarations about the future are unalterable. Indeed, they sometimes chastise people for drawing just this conclusion (see Jer. 18:2-11). If the classical understanding of God’s foreknowledge is correct, however, the future is unalterable! If God tells us what is coming in the future, it is no use to try to change it. The fact that the Word of God encourages us *not* to think this way suggests that the future is not exhaustively settled in reality, and thus not in the mind of God.⁸

In general, this is how Boyd would handle the vast majority of prophecies given in the Bible. They are open-ended and subject to change, since God has chosen to remain open to the possibilities of the future decisions of men.

One of the inherent problems with this particular way of approaching prophecies in general involves those prophecies that have yet to be fulfilled. It means that present-day readers of the Bible cannot depend upon such prophecies with any certainty. Even if some of the prophecies were certain, how would the believer know which prophecies were sure and which were open? This entire concept diminishes not only God’s glory, but also the hope of the average Christian about his future. If open theism is correct, this leads to two other possible conclusions: either the Bible potentially contains errors since predictions by God may not come true or all prophecy has been fulfilled (i.e, preterism is true). Both of these ideas will be dealt with later in this article.

For now, it is instructive to examine John Piper’s response to Boyd on his handling of the all-important Jeremiah passage. Piper makes a couple of salient points about Boyd’s mishandling of this text. First, there is no need to resort to an

⁶ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 44.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 160-61.

anthropomorphic reading of the text to resolve the tension for the classical theist who believes in exhaustive foreknowledge on God's part.

I say that there is a real change in God's mind, but that this does not imply a lack of foreknowledge. God can express an intention or a resolve toward a people that accords with what is true now, all the while knowing that this condition will not be true in the future, and that his resolve will also be different when their condition is different. That an [sic] future-knowing God speaks this way is owing to the fact that he really means for his word to be the means of bringing about changes in people to which he himself responds in a way that he knows he will.⁹

Furthermore, Piper rejects Boyd's desire to see God's so-called change of mind dependent upon "unforeseen future developments." Piper argues that philosophical presuppositions (relative to classical theism) do not drive his conclusion, but that his deduction is based upon "exegetical insights from other relevant texts which make us hesitant to affirm that God changes his mind without qualification."¹⁰

A case in point is the crucial example of 1 Samuel 15. Piper brings two texts together from that chapter which the open theists tend to separate.¹¹ Verse eleven notes that "God says, 'I repent that I have made Saul king; for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments.'" Verses 28-29 give Samuel's statement to Saul: "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Glory of Israel will not lie or repent for he is not a man, that he should repent." Piper's comments are powerful and to the point:

A natural reading of 1 Samuel 15 would seem to imply that there is a way that God does "repent" and a way that he does not. That is what I am arguing in the texts that Boyd puts forward. He insists that God repents in a way that implies lack of foreknowledge of what is coming. I think this is the kind of "repentance" that would fall under Samuel's criticism: "God is not a man that he should repent." . . . In other words, God does not have the human limitation of knowledge that would involve him repenting *that way*. Rather his repentance is an expression of a resolve or an attitude that is fitting in view of new circumstances. That God is ignorant of what will call for the new resolve or attitude is not necessarily implied in the charge.¹²

In other words, Boyd and other open theists have mishandled the repentance texts, which are the basis for seeing prophecy as conditional. In light of the 1 Samuel passage, Piper warns that the Bible interpreter should be "slow to attribute human-like repentance to God."¹³ But this is what the open theist rushes to do. Consequently, so-called repentance

⁹ John Piper, "Answering Greg Boyd's Openness of God Texts," available from <http://bgcworld.org/4know/answer.htm>; Internet; accessed January 17, 2001, p. 3-4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 4.

¹¹ Ibid., 4-5.

¹² Ibid., 4.

texts cannot be used to suggest that most prophecies of the Bible are conditional in nature.¹⁴

Boyd's response to 1 Samuel 15:28-29 is that classical theists take all of the other repentance texts in a non-literal sense while taking this one literally. He prefers to see that God is sometimes willing to change his mind and sometimes He is not (as in this passage). He also argues that God is not human-like in his repentance due to his perfection. That is, He repents perfectly and not deceitfully or arbitrarily as men do.¹⁵ However, Boyd does not seem to have a handle on Piper's objection. In these responses, he still views God's repentance as based on the model of human repentance. However, 1 Samuel 15:29 categorically states that God is not man-like. Piper correctly wants to understand that the passage is not affirming a comparative analogy of degree with God and man as the two points of comparison, but a dogmatic statement about the nature of God as something entirely different from humankind.

Perhaps a paradigm for handling prophecy in many cases is the way that God looks at his promises to David and Israel inherent in the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam. 7). Of particular interest is the reaffirmation of that covenant promise in grace terms given in Psalm 89. In Psalm 89 God acknowledges the unconditional nature of his promise to David concerning the Davidic line and kingdom. He could never change His mind about His promise to David, otherwise God would be a liar (v. 35). This is stated in unambiguous and strong language:

My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and this throne as the days of heaven. . . . Nevertheless my loving-kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven (Ps. 89:28-37; KJV).

This absolute promise to David concerning the overall program aligned with God's promises to David and the nation of Israel would be true even if individual Davidic descendants forfeited their right to the blessings of the covenant upon them as individuals:

If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; If they break my statutes, and keep not my commandments; Then I will visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my loving-kindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail (Ps. 89:30-33; KJV).

¹³ Ibid., 5. Another good response to open theism's humanizing of God is A. B. Caneday, "The Implausible God of Open Theism," available from <http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/implsbla.htm>; Internet; accessed January 17, 2001.

¹⁴ Boyd gives three other examples besides Jeremiah 18 to support the conditionality of most prophecies: Jonah 3:4b, Isaiah 38:1, 1 Samuel 23:10-12. See "Open View of the Future," 7. Piper responds in similar fashion to most of these.

¹⁵ Boyd, "Open View of the Future," 7-8.

In other words, God is saying that his prior unconditional and absolute promise to David could not be changed, altered, or annulled by the later free actions of the various Davidic kings. God knew ahead of time that many of them would fail, but asserted that He was not open to the cancellation of the entire covenant package. Only the individual's participation in the experience of blessing under the covenant would be cancelled.

The significance of this truth for the present debate is no small matter in light of the fact that *the covenant promises (especially Abrahamic, Davidic, and New Covenants) are interconnected and that the vast majority of prophetic details in the Old Testament text relate to these same covenant promises.* Furthermore, Psalm 89 ties the absolute fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant to God's assertion of his own holiness (v. 35). If the many prophecies related to this and associated covenants are an open question, then God's attribute of holiness becomes an open question. Surely, open theists do not want their system inadvertently to lead to this potential theological quagmire.

Boyd's second category for dealing with prophecy can be summarized as "prophecies which concern what God insures will transpire." Here he acknowledges that some prophecies are unconditional and will be brought about by God regardless of the future free-will decisions of men. He cites Messianic prophecies, predictions about the destruction of certain cities, and exceptional details in history relative to such things as Peter's threefold denial (Jn. 20:25-27), threefold affirmation of love (Jn. 21:15-17), and death (Jn. 21:18).¹⁶

While it is good that Boyd acknowledges this category and God's powerful action in history with respect to it, it is apparent that such thinking actually creates some problems for his open system. For example, when he affirms that Peter's death is an insured result by God's prediction, does he take into account the free-will actions of the Romans who, according to tradition, later killed Peter? To be consistent, since freewill human agents are involved, then why does he not refer to the prediction of Peter's death as an open-ended question at the time of its forecast. If God can override or use the freewill decisions of men in such cases, why can He not do it in all cases? Furthermore, if the assertion above is correct that the Old Testament covenant promises, with their many unconditional predictions and prophecies, serve as an umbrella covering a majority of the Old Testament prophecies, then most of the Old Testament prophecies are in Boyd's second category of sure prophecies and not his first category of conditional prophecies.¹⁷ This seems to go counter to his main concern that most, though not all, of the prophetic map of the future is unsettled.

Boyd's third way of handling prophecies involves prophecies that "are based on inevitable or likely consequences."¹⁸ Boyd cites several prophecies in this category such as 1 Samuel 23:10-12; Jer. 38:17-18, 20-21, 23. Boyd's language is not all that clear in his discussion on these passages. For example, in 1 Samuel 23, David asks God if the men of Keilah will surrender him and his men to King Saul if he stays in Keilah. God's answer is that they will. So, according to Boyd, David leaves and the scenario, which

¹⁶ Boyd, "Open View of the Future," 7.

¹⁷ The assertion that this is so needs to be verified inductively from the text itself. Such an enterprise is outside the scope of this present article.

¹⁸ Boyd, "Open View of the Future," 7.

God said would take place, did not happen. Boyd asserts that this passage suggests that God's foreknowledge is "not always about what *will* certainly happen; it is often about what *might* happen."¹⁹ The word *might* does not easily fit his category of "inevitable or likely consequences." However, in general terms, one can get his meaning. Boyd believes that according to this passage, the future is open. David must make a decision, which determines what God actually knows in an absolute sense. However, God presumably knows in a preliminary sense how things will go for both Saul and the men of Keilah because their past and present character makes them reasonably predictable. Boyd also places great weight on the word *will* when God says Saul "*will* come down" and that the men of Keilah "*will* surrender you." This way of expressing things strengthens the prophecy's apparent straightforwardness, yet the events do not come to pass. In this way, Boyd believes that the case for open-ended prophecies is maintained even under this category of prophecies.²⁰

What is the classical theist to make of Boyd's handling of this passage? First of all, the passage actually strengthens the case for classical theism's view of foreknowledge rather than the other way around. The meaning of the passage is that God knows *not only what will happen but also the potential future actions of men*. That is, if David stays in Keilah, God knows what will happen. He tells David this so that he goes somewhere else. This is the straightforward reading of the passage. It does not require any special pleading or theologizing about inevitable or likely consequences in the context of an open future. It is a strong hint that God knows all about the future including all possible paths that men could take. Boyd simply assumes too much about the word *will* and the overall meaning of the passage.

Boyd also shows a bit of confusion on which category this passage should go in. He lists it under both *conditional prophecies* (his first category) and this third category based upon *inevitable or likely consequences*.²¹ It could be that there is overlap. However, in this passage, if Boyd actually means the first category, one must protest that the conditions of Saul coming down or the men of Keilah giving David up to Saul are conditions that God clearly knows ahead of time! He is not waiting to know how the human decisions turn out. He tells David what to do based upon his foreknowledge of potential human actions. This is a far cry from an open-ended future telling God what to know when the events actually happen.

Boyd's position on this passage, which emphasizes the third category of predictability, minimizes what God knows by assuming that God's success in predicting the correct state of affairs has nothing to do with God's absolute knowledge of the future.

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

¹⁹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 160.

²⁰ Boyd, "Open View of the Future," 7. For a corroborating view from Richard Rice see "Biblical Support For a New Perspective" in *The Openness of God* by Clark Pinnock, et al (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994): 11-58, especially p. 33.

²¹ Ibid.

all future variables, makes the person's future behavior certain. As we all 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. Hence, generally speaking, the range of viable options we are capable of choosing diminishes over time.

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. This does not mean that everything we will do is predictable, for our present character doesn't determine all of our future. But it does mean that our behavior is predictable to the extent that our character is solidified and future circumstances that will affect us are in place.²²

To parse Boyd's words here one must begin by remembering that, for an open theist like Boyd, omniscience does not mean that God has exhaustive knowledge of the future. Also, his understanding that God knows all *future variables* is problematic. Are not the future free decisions of men variables? Does he mean variables that have nothing to do with human decisions? What is left when these human decisions are removed from the plot of history? If he means by "future variables" that God knows what would have happened under certain circumstances, he has not removed his problem. The men involved are still free agents. *How can one assert that God does not know what free moral agents will do when God does know what they would have done under different circumstances?* Such a portrait is unworthy of the God of the Bible.

John Sanders' Analysis of Prophecy

John Sanders, another open theist, discusses prophetic passages under a number of various categories. In general terms, he believes that "God is yet working to fulfill his promises and bring his project to fruition. The eschaton will surprise us because it is not set in concrete; it is not unfolding according to a prescribed script."²³ He prefers the word *project* over the phrase *eternal blueprint* since, according to his understanding, "God has not scripted the way everything in human history will go. God has a goal, but the routes remain open."²⁴

Within this broad understanding of a partially open future from God's perspective, Sanders makes a distinction between *prophecies* (or promises) and *predictions* (or forecasts). Predictions are singular forecasts that only come about one time. In contrast, prophecies are fulfilled repeatedly and thereby "allow room for God to fulfill them in a variety of ways—ways that we cannot anticipate."²⁵ In light of this, Sanders highlights some of the same categories that Boyd used. Following Rice's present-knowledge model, he asserts that predictions can be handled in one of three ways:²⁶

²² Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 35.

²³ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 125.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 130, 133.

1. As statements of what God intends to do apart from any conditions imposed by his creatures (Boyd's second category);
2. As declarations that are conditioned by the creatures of God (Boyd's first category);
3. As inferences based on God's exhaustive knowledge of the past and present (Boyd's third category).²⁷

As marked, these three approaches are the same as those mentioned above for Boyd.

However, with respect to prophecies and not predictions, Sanders presents the idea of *multiple fulfillments*. Because his category of prophecy contains and, in fact, is virtually defined in terms of repeated fulfillments, its elasticity allows for the variety of possibilities necessary to assert that the future is open. This is so because of the way Sanders views repeated fulfillments.

God fulfills prophecies or promises repeatedly, bringing out new aspects of them in conjunction with the new historical situation. Despite the messianic prophecies, no one anticipated the sort of messiahship that Jesus exhibited. The book of Acts (2:16-21) claims that the promised outpouring of the Spirit on the day of the Lord in Joel 2:28-32 occurred on the day of Pentecost, although most of the specific "signs" mentioned by Joel did not occur. If this a prediction, it must be explained why things did not come about as predicted. But if it is a prophecy, then God is free to bring it to fulfillment in a way befitting the new situation. Acts 15:15-18 cites the fulfillment of Amos 9:11-12. Whereas Amos had prophesied of Israel's return to political glory and rule over Edom, James claims in Acts 15 that this prophecy has been fulfilled by the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God. James understands that Israel will "rule" over the Gentiles through faith in Jesus. If this was a prediction, then it was a failure, for Israel has not ruled Edom. But if it was a prophecy, then it was open to fulfillment in the way the wisdom of God saw fit.²⁸

Notice Sanders' three examples: the messiahship of Jesus, Joel 2 in Acts 2, and Amos 9 in Acts 15. In his mind, all three of these show that God can choose to fulfill prior prophecies within history in any way that He chooses irrespective of the expectations of fulfillment which obtain as a result of the original words of the prophecy in the Old Testament. This is so, as Sanders says, because "God is sovereign over his prophecies and can bring them to fruition in the way he deems best fitted to the particular historical circumstances."²⁹ Notice that this way of talking is consistent with open theism's view that God can change His mind. Applied to prophecies, it allows God to totally disconnect His future plan from any past plans that He has already revealed. What is not entirely

²⁷ Open theists are fairly consistent on these three points. Richard Rice joins Boyd and Sanders in affirming these three categories although he states them in a slightly different way: 1) "A prophecy may express God's intention to do something in the future irrespective of creaturely decision" [Boyd's second category]; 2) "A prophecy may also express God's knowledge that something will happen because the necessary conditions for it have been fulfilled and nothing could conceivably prevent it" [Boyd's third category]; 3) "A prophecy may also express what God intends to do *if* certain conditions obtain" [Boyd's first category]. See Rice, "Biblical Support," 51.

²⁸ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 126.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

clear in Sanders' presentation is the extent to which he allows for later fulfillments that take up the slack of remaining Old Testament prophecy.³⁰

From this writer's dispensational premillennial perspective, this open approach to prophecies has many fatal flaws. **First**, it leads to an abandonment of literal interpretation (understood as grammatical-historical interpretation), especially in the Old Testament text. **Second**, it ignores what was said earlier about the comprehensiveness of the biblical covenants with respect to prophecies, especially in the Old Testament. In fact, there is an amazing consistency in the way that the prophecies and their fulfillment are developed over time in the Bible. The open view of prophecy actually leads to a fragmentation of the historical plot line of divine redemption given in the biblical record due to the allowed disconnect between promise and fulfillment. In short, open theists do not read the Bible holistically. **Third**, the open way of handling prophecy opens the door for impugning the character of God. Although God can do more than He promised, He cannot do less than He promised. Open theists apparently allow God to abandon His original promise to the original Old Testament audience. This leaves open theism exposed to the charge of allowing God's character to be questioned with respect to his truthfulness and faithfulness. **Fourth**, a corollary to this last point is that open theism appears to lead to an abandonment of any national future for Israel. This is implied in the way that Sanders interprets the three examples of fulfillment, that is, in a way unrelated to the national interests of Israel. However, even the New Testament affirms a national future for Israel (e.g., Rom. 9-11; Rev. 7, 12).

Fifth, Sanders' appeal to the three areas of fulfillment (Messiah, Acts 2, Acts 15) ignores plausible interpretations contrary to his own that are consistent with a literal understanding of the original Old Testament promises. Sanders asserts, for example, that "no one anticipated the sort of messiahship that Jesus exhibited."³¹ However, one has to ask about the time frame involved in Jesus "exhibiting" His messiahship. Certainly, the miracles that Jesus did at the First Advent caused many Jews to wonder and hope about His potential messianic credentials (e.g., Matt. 12:22-23; 16:1-16). The expectations of the people about Messiah, in these and similar cases, is not inconsistent with the Old Testament portrait of the coming Messiah. However, what about the kingship promises over a restored Israel? These await the Second Coming. They will be fulfilled literally when He comes to conquer as a warrior-king. The majority of Jews did not miss Jesus' identification as the Messiah because He came in a totally unexpected way. They did not recognize Him as Messiah largely because they were too selective in their reading of the Old Testament text. They reveled in the glory and kingship passages but ignored the passages that spoke of the Messiah in lowly and death-related terms (e.g., Is. 53; Dan. 9:24-27; Zech. 9:9). The only possible unexpectedness is that there are actually two Advents. First Advent fulfillments are not in and of themselves unexpected. They are

³⁰ It is not likely that open theists allow for this in the same way that dispensationalists do. This is probably due to their friendliness toward preterism, which will be discussed later. By way of preterism, one can try to say (albeit unsuccessfully) that there are no future fulfillments relative to the nation of Israel. Also, it is unclear that Sanders actually lays out the "multiple" part of "multiple fulfillments." He primarily analyzes singular New Testament fulfillments in light of their unexpectedness relative to Old Testament promises. "Multiple or repeated fulfillments" may not be the best expression for this approach.

³¹ Ibid., 126.

simply incomplete. The Christian faith has almost always asserted that it is the two comings of Christ that make sense of all of the prophecies.

Similar analysis can be given with respect to Sanders' handling of Joel 2 in Acts 2 and Amos 9 in Acts 15. Dispensationalists have offered more than one proposal concerning Acts 2:16-21. Many dispensationalists have recognized that there is no fulfillment of the details of the Joel 2 passage in Acts 2:16-21 such as the universality of the outpouring of the Spirit, the cosmic signs, and the presence of the day of the Lord tribulation. Furthermore, the context of the restoration of Israel to its land, which is part of the presentation of Joel does not seem to be clearly spelled out in Acts 2. Therefore, many dispensationalists have argued for analogous fulfillment³² or for a view of openness to the soon fulfillment of Joel's prophecy if Israel nationally repents.³³ Sanders' terse presentation on this passage does not do justice to the wide-ranging debates about the use of the Old Testament in the New, especially in such crucial passages. He just assumes, without exegetical comment, that the passage is a Day-of-Pentecost fulfillment in a way not expected at all and apparently disconnected with the actual Old Testament promise in its own context. Such an approach emasculates the Old Testament text.

Sanders also demonstrates open theism's willingness to see a disconnect between Old Testament promise and New Testament fulfillment when he affirms that Amos did indeed predict a restoration of Israel to political glory and rule over Edom (Amos 9:11-12) while James in Acts 15 quotes Amos' words to claim that Israel rules over the Gentiles through faith in Jesus. That is, the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God is sufficient to see fulfillment. Again, Sanders glosses over the many exegetical discussions with respect to this passage. Dispensationalism has always affirmed that the prophecy of Amos 9:11ff will be fulfilled in the Second Advent of Christ. James' use of the Amos passage is an application of it to a first century situation and not the actual fulfillment of the promise. One way to view James' statement is that he was telling his audience that they should not be surprised by God's implementation of the Gentile mission since God had all along predicted that the Gentiles would be included in His ultimate plan. There is nothing in either the Old Testament or New Testament texts cited by Sanders to suggest anything about Israel ruling over the Gentiles through faith in Jesus in the present age.

Sanders' way of handling divine promises via multiple fulfillments like those discussed above stems from his view of present knowledge or presentism. Briefly defined, presentism is the position that "affirms omniscience but denies exhaustive foreknowledge."³⁴ This is essentially a redefinition of omniscience in a direction away from the classical understanding. Sanders believes that "though God's knowledge is coextensive with reality in that God knows all that can be know, the future actions of free creatures are not yet reality, and so there is nothing to be known."³⁵ This limited view of

³² For example, see Arno C. Gaebelin, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Exposition* (New York: Publication Office "Our Hope," 1912; reprint, Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1961), 52-53.

³³ For example, see Zane Hodges, "A Dispensational Understanding of Acts 2" in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, edited by John R. Master and Wesley R. Willis (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 167-80.

³⁴ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 198.

omniscience is confirmed by the fact that Sanders seems to suggest that God can be mistaken about what will happen in the future. He cites the encounter between God and Moses in Exodus 3-4, especially God's language of alleged uncertainty about His own forecast in 4:4-9.³⁶ If this is so, one can see how Sanders would appeal to his brand of multiple fulfillments to handle several Bible prophecies.

Can God's Will Be Thwarted?

In all of these discussions, one comes away with the idea that open theists believe that God's will can be thwarted if prophecies are fulfilled in ways that even He did not anticipate. In his presentation on this subject, Sanders appears to (over)react to fatalism, that is, the attitude "what will be will be."³⁷ If this writer understands him correctly, he teaches that God's will can be thwarted at secondary levels, but not at the primary level. Sanders uses the analogy of a professor in a classroom to explain: "It may be said that God intends to establish opportunity for discussion in the classroom and so permits things to be said that on a secondary level he never approved of."³⁸ In other words, Sanders describes how this works: "God's overarching intentions cannot fail in that God establishes the boundaries in which the world will operate; but God's detailed or particular desires can fail in that God may not achieve all he wants for every individual."³⁹

In response to this line of thinking, one is forced to ask how it is to be decided which part of God's plan is primary and which part is secondary. Does Scripture really separate out these two areas clearly for us? Open theists believe so. Classical theists are skeptical. Dispensationalists would especially be doubtful since open theists appear to place God's promises to Israel as secondary matters. It is certainly not clear that Daniel and the exilic Jews would be happy to know that this is how God really viewed them when He gave them their national hope for the future in Daniel's many prophecies.

The Fall-Back Position of Preterism

On what grounds can it be said that open theists treat God's promises to Israel as secondary matters which really do not have to be fulfilled for the nation as the people would have understood at the time of the prophecies? For one thing, as one reads the writings of open theists, it is clear that they do not emphasize the *national* future of Israel. Such is clear from Sanders' description of Romans 9-11, which focuses mostly on the salvation of individual Jews within the framework of the Church's evangelistic

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 205. For a response to this particular element in open theism, see John Piper, "Does God Make Mistakes?" available from <http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/mistakes.htm>; Internet; accessed January 17, 2001.

³⁷ Sanders, *The God Who Risks*, 231.

³⁸ Ibid., 229.

³⁹ Ibid., 230.

outreach.⁴⁰ In addition, it has already been shown how Sanders appeals to multiple fulfillments or unexpected fulfillments as a way to illustrate that God changed his mind with respect to the nation. One other area of openness theology tends in this direction as well, that is, the appearance of *preterism* in the writings of some open theists.

Preterism is the view that some or all of the prophecies in the Bible have already been fulfilled, usually in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. It is a view that has no future for national Israel. Extreme preterism argues that all prophecies have been fulfilled; moderate preterism argues that most have been fulfilled but not all. In one sense, it is possible to visualize how an open theist might like extreme preterism. If all biblical prophecies have been fulfilled, then he does not have the difficult category of unfulfilled prophecies with which to deal. Future hope for Christians can then be more generalized without the specific details of prophecy. On the other hand, to maintain that some prophecies remain to be fulfilled is in keeping with the open theist's declaration that the future is partly settled and partly open to new possibilities. None of the writings of the open theists to this point demonstrate any reliance upon an extreme preterist approach.

It is also not clear that open theists in general are moving to preterism although Gregory Boyd has certainly written in favor of that position. Boyd's moderate preterism comes through most clearly in his handling of the book of Revelation. While acknowledging the possibility that the book deals with events at the end of history, Boyd argues that a preterist interpretation for the book makes better sense since the original audience would have understood the book in that way. He appeals to the time-frame references in the book such as the word "soon" and "near" describing when the events would take place ((1:1; 1:3, 22:6, 10, etc.). When read appropriately, Boyd believes that certain things are then true about the book.

We find that most of the symbols used throughout this work have their origin in the Old Testament and their primary application in the first century. For example, it is easy to see the emperor Nero as "the beast" since the name "Nero Caesar" in Hebrew . . . adds up to 666 (13:18). Moreover, the forty-two months of his horrifying reign (13:5) turns out to be the exact duration of the Roman siege on Jerusalem beginning in A.D. 66.⁴¹

Boyd combines his preterism with an idealist interpretation of the book of Revelation as well. In that understanding the book provides "readers with a symbolic pattern of God's conflict with Satan throughout history."⁴²

While it is beyond the scope of this article to give a full-blown refutation of preterism, the heart of the matter is the future of Israel.⁴³ Many of the prophecies in

⁴⁰ Ibid., 120-24.

⁴¹ Boyd, *God of the Possible*, 50.

⁴² Ibid., 171, n. 7.

⁴³ For discussions of preterism, both pro and con, see R. C. Sproul, *The Last Days According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998); Thomas Ice and Kenneth Gentry, *The Great Tribulation: Past or Future?* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999); and Mike Stallard, "A Review of R. C. Sproul's *The Last Days*

question show that the Second Coming of Christ is not the judgment of Israel and Jerusalem in 70 A.D. Instead, Jesus is coming back to deliver and restore the nation and its principal city (Zech. 12-14; Amos 5, 8-9; Dan. 7-12; Rev. 19). Preterism must ignore such passages for in its scheme there is no future for Israel. However, remember that an earlier discussion mentioned that most of the prophecies in the Old Testament and perhaps in the entire Bible deal with some aspect of the future of Israel. It is not necessarily an accident that preterism is at home with the open view of God, since open theism's ability to absorb changes in past prophecies allows for the removal of fulfillment for Israel by way of God changing his mind. Consequently, premillennialism and dispensationalism cannot be harmonized with the open view of God due to the reliance upon a literal understanding of the Old Testament, which can never be replaced by later revelation.

Other Responses to Open Theism's Handling of Prophecy

Several other negative critiques have been made of open theism's handling of prophecy. Norman Geisler argues that several teachings relative to prophecy are problematic if open theism were to be true. **First, he affirms that the test of a true prophet given in Deuteronomy 18:22 would fail:** "If what a prophet claims in the name of the LORD does not take place or come true, that is a message the LORD has not spoken. That prophet has spoken presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him."⁴⁴ This is no small matter. "If the neotheists [open theists] are correct, this test is not valid. But if it is valid (since God gave it), then neotheism is not true."⁴⁵ As Geisler concludes, if neotheists are correct, Romans 3:4 should read "Let God be true—most of the time!"⁴⁶

Second, Geisler notes that open theism minimizes or removes the apologetic argument from predictive prophecy. He notes that "one of the strongholds of the Christian defense of the faith has been the unique supernatural nature of predictive prophecy . . . the argument from prophecy is the argument *from* omniscience."⁴⁷ To be sure, Sanders tries to minimize the effect his open future has on this issue with his distinction between prediction and prophecy. But the vast majority of the prophecies flow from the biblical covenants, which relate to the nation of Israel. The fact that the Bible's prophecies with respect to Israel have found fulfillment throughout history time and time again has great apologetic value since it points toward the divine origin of Scripture. Therefore, open theism destroys the apologetic value of most of the Bible while at the same time leaving future fulfillment as an open question.

According to Jesus: An Analysis of Moderate Preterism," (Unpublished paper delivered at the Conservative Theological Society, August 2001).

⁴⁴ Geisler, *Creating God*, 135.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 136.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 137.

Third, Geisler argues that open theists cannot logically guarantee ultimate future victory.⁴⁸ This is one of the complaints about process theology, a theological approach that has had an influence on open theists.⁴⁹ For the open theist, the future is partly determined and partly open while God has no knowledge of what will really happen until it happens. Geisler comments:

If as neotheists insist, God does not now the future for sure and does not intervene against freedom except on rare occasions, then it seems to follow that there is no guarantee of ultimate victory over evil. For how can he be sure that anyone will be saved without fettering freedom, which contradicts the neotheist's libertarian view of free will?⁵⁰

When one adds to this criticism the fact that, in open theism, prophecies are wide open and can be fulfilled in a way entirely unanticipated even by the Bible texts where God makes the promises, this objection becomes a major obstacle to open theism. No one can say dogmatically that good will win in the end.

Fourth, Geisler also argues, consistent with an earlier thesis in this paper, that open theism undermines God's unconditional promises. He notes "one of the consequences of making all predictions conditional is that it undermines confidence in God's promises. If we cannot be sure that God can keep his word, our belief in his faithfulness is seriously threatened."⁵¹ Geisler would also add that under an open theistic system there could be no assurance of salvation and no complete confidence in God's ability to answer prayer. While many of these notions cannot be explored in this article, it is clear that many practical questions, which relate to confidence in God and in biblical promises about the future, are raised by open theism's handling of prophetic portions of the Bible.

Two further objections raised against open theism involve its view of two different classes of future events and the difficulties it brings to the doctrine of inerrancy. As to the first of these objections, recall that open theists teach that God knows what He intends to do but does not know certainly what others will do (since they have free will). Such thinking, according to classical theists, ignores the meaning of passages like Isaiah 46:9-10 which deal directly with God's knowledge of the future: "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, Declaring the end from the beginning, And from ancient times things which have not been done, Saying, 'My purpose will be established, And I will accomplish all My good pleasure.'" Piper discusses the interaction of open theists with this passage and those like it:

⁴⁸ Ibid., 139.

⁴⁹ For a critique of process theology on this point, see Millard Erickson, *God the Father Almighty* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 64-65.

⁵⁰ Geisler, *Creating God*, 139.

⁵¹ Ibid., 141.

Those who deny God's exhaustive definite foreknowledge object that the predictions in view here are only of things God intends to bring about himself. And, they say, of course he knows what he intends to do. But they deny that God claims to foreknow certainly what others will do.

But that assumes there are two classes of future events: those God predetermines and therefore foreknows; and those that arise from some other source than his plan, and which he does not know are coming, namely, those that arise from human and demonic choices. But does Isaiah make this distinction? I don't think so. For this reason: virtually all the predictions God has in mind in these texts in regard to Israel's future judgment and rescue involve thousands of human choices to bring them about; yet God foreknows them; and this knowing is what it means for him to be God. Isaiah does not separate what God is planning to do and what man will choose to do. Virtually all God's judgments and deliverances involved choices that humans would make as instruments of God's plan.⁵²

In other words, these two categories or distinctions with respect to the future, one to ensure God's own actions and one to ensure the free will of men, are arbitrary and not outlined by the Bible. It is impossible to separate free moral agents from every direct action by God in history. Open theism simply cannot have it both ways.

Many classical theists have also questioned whether open theism is compatible with the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.⁵³ Stiner suggests that this problem arises specifically due to the presence of unfulfilled prophecy.

The problem comes in when Scripture makes predictions about the future decisions of free beings that have not yet taken place. Again, these can only be possibilities (since God cannot know the future decisions of free beings as settled) which means that they could possibly be wrong. This means that God could possibly be wrong in these predictions. Those parts of God's word that make predictions about the future decisions of people could be in error; they might be accurate, they might not. Here is where we discover that open theism undermines biblical inerrancy. The only way this can be avoided is if an open theist interprets all such predictions as having already been fulfilled. In other words, in order to maintain the inerrancy of Scripture, an open theist must deny that the Bible predicts any future decisions of free-willed beings that have not already been fulfilled.⁵⁴

We have already seen that Boyd does allow for a preterist interpretation that holds to past fulfillment of some future passages. This does not handle all passages for Boyd. In addition, those verses that he considers fulfilled in the past can solve the problem in those specific areas only if the preterist position is exegetically successful. Therefore, he still has the potential within his system that prophecies will fail in light of the original promise. Sanders handled this by means of multiple fulfillments that allowed for a New Testament or future fulfillment totally disconnected from the actual promise given earlier.

⁵² John Piper, "Is the Glory of God at Stake in God's Foreknowledge of Human Choices?" available from <http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/glory.htm>; Internet; accessed January 17, 2001, p. 5.

⁵³ Geisler, *Creating God*, 129-35; Robert M. Stiner, "Open Theism and the Death of Biblical Inerrancy," available from <http://www.bgcworld.org/4know/stiner.htm>; Internet; accessed January 17, 2001; Mike Stallard, "An Open View of God . . . Does God Change?," 25 .

⁵⁴ Stiner, "Death of Biblical Inerrancy," 2.

In this case, the potential of errors in Bible prophecy are merely covered over through redefinition of the prophetic enterprise and what it means to have fulfillment. While the open theist maintains a belief in inerrancy based upon his own interpretation, a straightforward reading of the text compared with his own system will lead to the problem of potentially errant prophecy. Recall that at a secondary level, open theists are already allowed to talk about so-called mistakes God has made in prophecy. This discussion goes directly to the debate about the inerrancy of the text itself. Geisler summarizes:

Likewise, other neotheists insist that if some predictions in the Bible are fallible, then the Bible is not infallible, at least not in these areas. And, according to neotheism, all predictions involving human free choice are fallible. Thus, it follows that the Bible (which makes such predictions) cannot be a completely infallible book.⁵⁵

Both the character of God and His Word are intricately chained together. The open theists seem to have room in their theology for a God and a Bible that cannot explicitly guarantee the accuracy of future prophecies. In the end, this may mean that open theism has no right to claim its legacy as part of historic evangelicalism.

Conclusion

Much ink has already been used to highlight issues about man's free will that come up in the debate over open theism. This article has attempted not to repeat those discussions but to highlight what has been said and what needs to be said about open theism's treatment of prophecy. There are several more detailed studies in this area that would serve the evangelical community well. The connection between preterism and open theism needs to be explored more completely. Furthermore, a more definitive study of how open theism treats the nation of Israel and the related teaching of premillennialism would be useful. What this study has shown is that there are many problematic points and inconsistencies within open theology with respect to prophecy. These areas open the door to mistreatment of God, the Bible, Israel, and the future of all of us. There may be no reason to doubt the sincerity of the open theists. However, they should be encouraged to reexamine their theology in light of the more biblically accurate theology of classical theism in general and premillennialism in particular.

⁵⁵ Geisler, *Creating God*, 131.