

Does the Bible prove open theology?

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December 14, 2012

I've been working with my graduate theological students lately on issues pertaining to open theism. A few biblical passages have played key roles in the discussion.

I'm of the opinion that the majority of the Bible supports open theology's notions about a loving God in relationship with the world. I think the Bible generally supports the notion that creatures have genuine freedom, which God gives them.

I also think the Bible supports, overall, the view that God does not know all of the details of the future until those details are worked out in actual experience. I believe God knows all of the possibilities for the future. But I don't think God knows with certainty which possibilities will be actual until the time comes.

Let me be quick to admit, however, that a few passages in the Bible do not easily fit open theology. They don't fit, at least, in the way they are typically interpreted. In some, the English words translators use lead away from an openness perspective, although the original Hebrew or Greek words may not do so.

I thought I'd post the biblical passages we've been working through together. In my view, they support open and relational theologies well.

## **God Regrets**

In the story of Noah, we find that God observes something God apparently did not expect. In fact, God has regrets. This suggests that God doesn't know all of the future with certainty.

"The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." – Genesis 6:5-6

## **God Learns**

When God sends Abraham to kill his son, God isn't sure what Abraham will do. Will he be obedient? After seeing Abraham ready to go through with the sacrifice, God learns something about Abraham God did not know previously.

"Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." Genesis 22:10-2

## **God Changes Plans**

God says Hezekiah will die. This apparently reflects God's plans. But Hezekiah pleads for continued life. So God changes plans, based on Hezekiah's response. This suggests the future is not settled, complete, or done, and God doesn't know with certainty all things that will occur in the future.

"In those days Hezekiah became sick and was at the point of death. The prophet Isaiah son of Amoz came to him, and said to him, "Thus says the LORD: Set your house in order, for you shall die; you shall not recover." Then Hezekiah turned his face to the wall, and prayed to the LORD: "Remember now, O LORD, I implore you, how I have walked before you in faithfulness with a whole heart, and have done what is good in your sight." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. Then the word of the LORD came to Isaiah: "Go and say to Hezekiah, Thus says the LORD, the God of your ancestor David: I have heard your prayer, I have seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life." Isaiah 38: 1-5

## **God Changes His Mind**

Many of us know the story of Jonah and the big fish. But fewer know that God's plans changed because of Nineveh's eventual repentance. God tells Jonah that the city will fall. But because Nineveh repented, God changed his mind. God's statement about Nineveh falling must have been conditional and not express something certain about the future.

"The word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time, saying, "Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you." So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an

exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth. When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes. Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: "By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish." When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it." Jonah 3:1-10

## **Proof?**

Do these passages (and many others like them) *prove* that open and relational theologies are the only way we rightly interpret the Bible? Do they *prove* that open and relational theologies offer the correct view of God and God's relation to creation and the future?

No.

But they offer compelling reasons for Christians who think open and relational theologies do a better job than other theological frameworks. They are strong evidence for the biblical basis for open theism. And biblical passages such as these invite us all into the discussion of how we might best think about, worship, imitate, and love the God described in the Bible.

Originally posted at [For the Love of Wisdom and the Wisdom of Love](#)