### God’s Omniscience (All-Knowing)

**1. Biblical Data**

**а. Old Testament**

Although the Torah does not specifically claim that Yahweh has all knowledge, nonetheless we see examples of His supernatural knowledge, both of future events, and of the secrets of people’s hearts. For example, God knew the future of Ishmael (Gen 16:12) and the sons of Jacob (Gen 25:23). He was also aware of the intention of Abimelech’s heart (Gen 20:6) and the hidden thoughts of His people Israel (Deut 31:21).

Yahweh’s omniscience is especially prominent in the book of Job. There it is specifically stated that He knows all things. For example, He sees all: “He looks to the ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens” (Job 28:24); “Does He not see my ways and number all my steps?” (Job 31:4); and “His eyes are upon the ways of a man, and He sees all his steps” (Job 34:21). Yahweh not only sees all that occurs on the earth, but also knows what is happening in Sheol (Job 26:6; 28:22-23).

The book of Job also presents the Lord as the great Teacher. Job poses the question, “Can anyone teach God knowledge, in that He judges those on high?” (Job 21:22). Elihu says of Him, “Behold, God is exalted in His power; who is a teacher like Him?” (Job 36:22). God’s wisdom is especially highlighted in the creation of the world (chps. 38-41).[[1]](#footnote-1) The fact of God’s omniscience underlies Elihu’s rhetorical question, “Do you know about the layers of the thick clouds, the wonders of one perfect in knowledge?” (Job 37:16).

The book of Job also contains some practical applications for the doctrine of Yahweh’s omniscience. Seeing that He knows all things, “there is no darkness or deep shadow where the workers of iniquity may hide themselves” (Job 34:22). In addition, Job can appeal to God with the confidence that He fully understands his situation (Job 31:5-6). Finally, in light of Yahweh’s wisdom displayed in creation, people need not doubt His ability to direct their lives (Job chps. 38-41).

The Old Testament historical books also contribute to our understanding of this truth.[[2]](#footnote-2) Hanna affirms, “Yahweh is a God of knowledge” (1 Sam 2:3). Solomon asserts that God “alone know the hearts of all the sons of men” (1 Kin 8:39, сf. 1 Chr 28:9; 2 Chr 6:30). We make special note of the Lord’s knowledge of time and circumstances. He not only knows the past, present, and future, but also know what would have been under different conditions.[[3]](#footnote-3) Observe this feature in the following texts:

- Then David said, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?” And Yahweh said, “They will surrender you” (1 Sam 23:12).

- So the man of God was angry with him and said, “You should have struck five or six times, then you would have struck Aram until you would have destroyed {it}. But now you shall strike Aram {only} three times” (2 Kin 13:19).

We move on to examine the Old Testament poetical books where, as throughout the Scriptures, the practical implications of a truth is emphasized. Yahweh knows all our suffering and grief (Ps 35:22; 56:8; 69:19; 142:3) and also our sins (Ps 69:5; 90:8). In the Proverbs, Solomon draws attention to God knowing our hearts (Prov 15:11; 16:2; 21:2). He knows us better than we know ourselves.

Yahweh knows everything about His creation: “I know every bird of the mountains, and everything that moves in the field is Mine” (Ps 50:11);[[4]](#footnote-4) and “He counts the number of the stars; He gives names to all of them” (Ps 147:4). He has done all in wisdom (Ps 104:24). At times, the psalmist simply expresses His awe at the Lord’s wisdom and understanding: “How great are Your works, O Yahweh! Your thoughts are very deep” (Ps 92:5); and “Great is our Lord and abundant in strength; His understanding is infinite” (Ps 147:5). Therefore, “There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against Yahweh” (Prov 21:30).

As noted earlier, God’s knowledge is associated with His “vision”: “Yahweh looks from heaven; He sees all the sons of men; from His dwelling place He looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth,” (Ps 33:13-14); “For the ways of a man are before the eyes of Yahweh, and He watches all his paths” (Prov 5:21); “The eyes of Yahweh are in every place, watching the evil and the good” (Prov 15:3); and “The eyes of Yahweh preserve knowledge…” (Prov 22:12).

The most striking description of Yahweh’s omniscience is found in Psalm 139. God knows all our deeds and thoughts (v. 2), our ways (v. 3), and all our words before we say them (v. 4). No one can hide from Him. “Even the darkness is not dark to You, and the night is as bright as the day. Darkness and light are alike {to You}” (v. 12). He knows us completely, from cradle to grave (v. 15-16). In light of this testimony, it is difficult to deny that Yahweh possesses all knowledge.

The Old Testament prophetic books also testify of God’s omniscience. They emphasize that no one can hide from Him. Note these examples:

- Woe to those who deeply hide their plans from Yahweh, and whose deeds are {done} in a dark place, and they say, "Who sees us?" or "Who knows us?" (Isa 29:15).

- For My eyes are on all their ways; they are not hidden from My face, nor is their iniquity concealed from My eyes (Jer 16:17; сf. 23:23-24; 32:19).

- Then He said to me, "Son of man, do you see what the elders of the house of Israel are committing in the dark, each man in the room of his carved images? For they say, 'Yahweh does not see us; Yahweh has forsaken the land'" (Ezek 8:12; сf. 9:9).

- I know Ephraim, and Israel is not hidden from Me; for now, O Ephraim, you have played the harlot, Israel has defiled itself (Hos 5:3).

The prophets again associate God’s knowledge with His “vision”: “The eyes of Yahweh… range to and fro throughout the earth” (Zech 4:10). This allows Him to be a “witness” of people’s sins (Mic 1:2) and to declare “to man what are His thoughts” (Amos 4:13).

We note in the prophets another example where the Lord knows not only was or will be, but also what might have been.[[5]](#footnote-5) We cite the book of the prophet Jeremiah:

Then Jeremiah said to Zedekiah, “Thus says Yahweh God of hosts, the God of Israel, ‘If you will indeed go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then you will live, this city will not be burned with fire, and you and your household will survive. But if you will not go out to the officers of the king of Babylon, then this city will be given over to the hand of the Chaldeans; and they will burn it with fire, and you yourself will not escape from their hand.’” Then King Zedekiah said to Jeremiah, “I dread the Jews who have gone over to the Chaldeans, for they may give me over into their hand and they will abuse me.” But Jeremiah said, “They will not give you over. Please obey Yahweh in what I am saying to you, that it may go well with you and you may live” (Jer 38:17-20).

Jeremiah especially stresses that Yahweh knows the condition of human hearts (see 11:20; 12:3; 17:10; 20:12). The goal of his prophecy, in fact, was to expose the evil intents and hidden attitudes of God’s people. In Daniel’s prophecy, we see emphasized the omniscient God’s ability to reveal mysteries (Dan 2:20-23, 28), which coincides with the apocalyptic character of his work.

Isaiah’s prophecy presents God as the one who knows the future with absolute precision.[[6]](#footnote-6) God not only knows His own future actions, but also what people will do or attempt to do. Yahweh says, “Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim {them} to you” (Isa 42:9). He also claims, “Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done” (Isa 46:10). The emphasis on the Lord’s knowledge of future thinks serves to prove His superiority over the pagan gods worshipped in Isaiah’s time.

Finally, the prophets declare that God’s wisdom and understanding exceed that which people possess: “For among all the wise men of the nations and in all their kingdoms, there is none like You” (Jer 10:7). His ways and thoughts are higher than ours (Isa 55:8-9), and, “His understanding is inscrutable” (Isa 40:28). Since no one can “direct the Spirit of Yahweh,” or, “as His counselor … inform Him” (Isa 40:13), it is senseless to dispute with Him (see Ezek 18:25-29; 33:17-20).

We must attempt to explain several examples where Yahweh seemingly altered His plan. This does not mean that He erred in His knowledge of the future. For example, God planned not to personally lead the children of Israel into the Promised Land, lest He might destroy them on the way (Ex 33:3). Yet, after Moses’ intercession, God changed His plan and accompanied Israel in the wilderness (Ex 33:14). Yahweh also annulled a threat to destroy Israel after Moses prayed (Deut 9:13ff). We also note that after Amos’ prayer, God again spared Israel: “Yahweh changed His mind about this. ‘It shall not be,’ said Yahweh” (Amos 7:3). In a similar way, upon their repentance, God annulled his threatened judgment on Nineveh (Jonah 3:10), Ahab (1 Kin 21:29), and Judah (2 Chr 12:5-8). Finally, the Lord revoked from Eli’s family the continuation in the priesthood promised to his family (1 Sam 2:30).

Jeremiah 18:10 reveals the principle involved here: “If (they do) evil in My sight by not obeying My voice, then I will think better of the good with which I had promised to bless (them).” On the other hand, “When a wicked man turns away from his wickedness which he has committed and practices justice and righteousness, he will save his life” (Ezek 18:27). These examples do not reflect God’s ignorance of the future, but His response to people’s behavior.

We also recall occasions in the Old Testament where is seems that Yahweh did not know something or regretted what He had done.[[7]](#footnote-7) For example, it appears that God was not aware of the sinful condition of Sodom: “I will go down now, and see if they have done entirely according to its outcry, which has come to Me; and if not, I will know” (Gen 18:21). In Jeremiah 3:7, God expected Israel to return to Him, but they did not. Isaiah 5:4 is similar: “What more was there to do for My vineyard that I have not done in it? Why, when I expected {it} to produce {good} grapes did it produce worthless ones?”

Moreover, we get the impression that Yahweh did not know ahead of time whether Israel would believe the first sign He gave to Moses (Ex 4:8), whether the people would obey the Ezekiel’s instruction (Ezek 2:5-7; 12:3), or whether the people would repent at the preaching of Jeremiah (Jer 26:2-3). In Genesis 9:14-15, the rainbow would remind God not to forget His covenant with the earth. Genesis 22:12 seems to indicate that the Lord did not know what was in Abraham’s heart before he “sacrificed” his son. Finally, God said, “I regret that I have made Saul king” (1 Sam 15:11), and He “was sorry that He had made man on the earth” (Gen 6:6).

As far as the cases where Yahweh supposedly lacked knowledge of something, again we are encountering the literary device “anthropomorphism,” where people ascribe to God (or God ascribes to Himself) purely human characteristics. God chose to thus reveal Himself to the people of antiquity, who were less “theologically developed” in their age. We must accept as conclusive the clear and repeated biblical teaching of Yahweh’s omniscience.

**b. New Testament**

The New Testament repeats much of the Old Testament teaching of Yahweh’s omniscience. For example, He knows all matters concerning His creation: “Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And {yet} not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered” (Matt 10:29-30). With these words, God comforts His disciples, assuring them of His care for them. In addition Yahweh is aware of all our need: “Your Father knows what you need before you ask Him” (Matt 6:8). God takes note of our service for Him, even when others take no notice (Matt 6:4). He is also the one “who examines our hearts.” (1 Thes 2:4, сf. Rev 2:23).

Yahweh knows what the future holds, even if these events depend on human choice. Jesus predicted that Peter would betray Him (Mk 14:30) and that a man carrying a jar of water would lead His disciples to the place where they would celebrate the Passover (Mk 14:12-16).

We will mention still another instance in the biblical narrative where God knew what people would do, even though the events never took place:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in {the} day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day (Matt 11:21-23).

The apostle John, along with the author of Hebrews, make direct reference to the Lord’s omniscience:[[8]](#footnote-8)

- He did not need anyone to testify concerning man, for He Himself knew what was in man (Jn 2:25).

- Now we know that You know all things (Jn 16:30).

- God is greater than our heart and knows all things (1 Jn 3:20).

- And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do (Heb 4:13).

Yahweh possesses perfect knowledge of Himself, i.e., all Persons of the Trinity have perfect knowledge of one another: “No one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal {Him}” (Matt 11:27),[[9]](#footnote-9) and, “The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10).

Finally, all the New Testament authors are awed by God’s greatness manifest in His wisdom and understanding: He is the “only wise God”(1 Tim 1:17, сf. Jude 25). Salvation demonstrates “the manifold wisdom of God.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Paul rightly exclaims, “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!” (Rom 11:33).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Before we draw conclusions from our study, we must note several instances in the New Testament where it seems that God (in particular, the Son) did not know something. For example, Jesus “grew in wisdom” (Lk 2:52). Once, Jesus encountered a boy possessed by a demon and asked his father, “How long has this been happening to him?” (Mk 9:21). Does this mean that Jesus did not already know this? Moreover, Jesus prayed all night before appointing His twelve disciples (Lk 6:12). It seems that He did not already know whom to choose. Finally, Jesus openly acknowledged that He did not know the time of His Second Coming: “But of that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father {alone}” (Mk 13:32). We will investigate these troubling passages later in this chapter.

**c. Summary**

In light of the biblical data, there can be no doubt that Yahweh knows all things – He possesses all knowledge. He not only knows the past and present, but also can unfailingly predict future events, even if those events depend on human volition. His knowledge is exhaustive.

The Lord not only has knowledge, but also knows how to apply that knowledge to accomplish His goals, that is, He has wisdom. God masterfully created the heavens, the earth, and all that is in them. In His wisdom, He formed humans, endowing them with amazing abilities. In wisdom, He accomplished His perfect plan of salvation, which to this day astounds those who study it. The Bible also testifies of instances where Yahweh knew what would have been, had conditions been different. So then, He has knowledge not only of real events, but also of all potential variations of those events.

 However, we must consider that in Scripture the doctrine of God’s omniscience is stressed in a more practical than theoretical sense. The fact that the Lord knows all things gives people comfort and assurance – He fully knows our needs and nothing escapes His notice. On the other hand, Yahweh’s omniscience also serves as a warning for those who would seek to hide their ways from Him – He sees all.

Since Yahweh knows all, we can look to Him to receive the information we need. We thus understand His prohibition about turning to inappropriate sources of information, such as the practitioners of the occult (see Deut 18:10-11). It is better to appeal to the most reliable source of knowledge – to God.[[12]](#footnote-12) For this reason, the Lord rebuked Ahaziah, because he looked to other gods for counsel, and not to the God of Israel:

So (Ahaziah) sent messengers and said to them, “Go, inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron, whether I will recover from this sickness.” But the angel of Yahweh said to Elijah the Tishbite, “Arise, go up to meet the messengers of the king of Samaria and say to them, ‘Is it because there is no God in Israel {that} you are going to inquire of Baal-zebub, the god of Ekron?’” (2 Kin 1:2-3).

**2. Theological Considerations**

**а. General Observations**

**1) Definitions**

Strong describes well Yahweh’s omniscience as “God’s perfect and eternal knowledge of all things which are objects of knowledge, whether they be actual or possible, past, present, or future.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Knowledge also involves wisdom. How can they be distinguished? Typically, wisdom is defined as the ability to apply knowledge in practice to a situation. Similarly, Grudem speaks of it as the ability to reach a goal: “God’s wisdom means that God always chooses the best goals and the best means to those goals.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

**2) God’s “Immediate” Knowledge**

We can enrich our understanding of Yahweh’s omniscience with the aid of the following concepts. First, theologians typically speak of God’s “immediate” knowledge. This means that He knows everything intuitively and directly. He does not need to employ deduction or induction to acquire knowledge.

Some leading evangelical theologians describe this phenomenon in the following ways. Pieper writes, “Man acquires his knowledge… by a process of perception, induction, deduction… God, however, knows and discerns the inner nature, the inherent essence of all objects directly and immediately.”[[15]](#footnote-15) In Grudem’s thought, God’s knowledge is “always fully present in his consciousness. He does not have to reason to conclusions…. He never learns and never forgets anything.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Carl Henry comments, “If God’s knowledge is temporally conditioned, he cannot then have simultaneous knowledge or complete knowledge of all objects and events as omniscience requires.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Finally, Charles Hodge teaches that the Lord “knows all things as they are, being as being, phenomena as phenomena, the possible as possible, the actual as actual, the necessary as necessary, the free as free, the past as past, the present as present, the future as future.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Two theories exist to explain Yahweh’s immediate knowledge: the perceptualist model and the conceptualist model.[[19]](#footnote-19) According to the first, God “sees” everything simultaneously and thus obtains all knowledge. Yet, some feel that this approach is too anthropomorphic. The conceptualist model posits that the Lord knows everything intuitively, that is, within Himself.

**3) Natural, Free, and Middle Knowledge**

Other terms are employed to characterize Yahweh’s knowledge. First, He perfectly knows everything pertaining to Himself. This is termed His “natural knowledge,” or, in Latin, *scientia naturalis essentialis.*[[20]](#footnote-20) Next, God knows everything outside of Himself, that is, about His creation. This is His “free knowledge,” or *scientia libera.*[[21]](#footnote-21)

Yahweh’s knowledge of the future interfaces with both of the above-mentioned categories. First, He knows everything that He plans to do: “Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim {them} to you” (Isa 42:9). He also knows what humans will freely do: “Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Yahweh, You know it all” (Ps 139:4).

Yahweh’s “middle knowledge,” or *scientia media,* refers to His knowledge of what could be or what could have been.[[22]](#footnote-22) Not all, however, agree that God possesses such knowledge, namely, Calvinists reject it. They believe that God predestines absolutely all that occurs. Therefore, it is senseless to speak of what “could have been.” All that God has planned and predestined with unfailingly come to pass. For Calvinists, then, “middle knowledge,” then, is purely theoretical and does not constitute real knowledge.

Furthermore, Calvinists claim that the concept of “middle knowledge” violates the concept of Yahweh’s “immediate knowledge.” As we mentioned before, He knows all things intuitively and directly. He does not need to induce or deduct. Yet, in instances of “middle knowledge,” God must examine all the potential variants of what could occur given different circumstances or human choices, which allegedly requires the use of deduction.[[23]](#footnote-23)

Additionally, opponents to the theory of middle knowledge explain passages that support this view as follows. In 1 Samuel 23:12, where David inquires of the Lord, “Will the men of Keilah surrender me and my men into the hand of Saul?" and Yahweh replied, "They will surrender you,” God is simply revealing the intention of David’s enemies. In the case of Matthew 11:21-23, where Jesus predicts that Tyre and Sidon would have repented at His miracles, He is simply illustrating the point that the cities of His day were more reprobate than these ancient cities.[[24]](#footnote-24)

However, in answer to these objections we respond, first of all, that Scripture contains other instances of middle knowledge: 2 Kings 13:19 and Jeremiah 38:17-20. Second, in most of these cases the Lord describes in detail what might have been, which gives the impression that He truly foresaw these events. Third, rejection of God’s ability to foresee potentialities not only contradicts Scripture, but also seems to diminish His glory. The Lord said through Jeremiah, “Is anything too difficult for Me?” (Jer 32:27).

**4) Limits to God’s Omniscience**

The question arises whether God has knowledge of logical contradictions? Can Yahweh conceive of a circular square, or make 2 + 3 equal 5? We respond that logical contradictions do not and cannot exist in reality, and that knowledge of that type is not genuine knowledge. So then, if God lacks such “knowledge,” it is of no detriment to His omniscience. Let us recall Strong’s definition of omniscience: “God’s perfect and eternal knowledge of all things which are objects of knowledge, whether they be actual or possible, past, present, or future.”[[25]](#footnote-25) A logical absurdity is not a proper object of knowledge, since it is neither actual nor possible.[[26]](#footnote-26)

What can we say about knowledge based on experience? Knowledge as experience differs from knowledge as information. If the Lord has not experienced all that one can experience, then how can He possess all knowledge? In response, we explain that the doctrine of omniscience, in a formal sense, concerns knowledge as information, not as experience. Yet, one must also keep in mind that God the Son became man and experienced on earth much that humans uniquely experience. It is written of Him, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as {we are, yet} without sin” (Heb 4:15).[[27]](#footnote-27)

Another challenging question raised earlier in this chapter: “If Jesus is God, then why were there instances when He did not know something?” First, in line with the doctrine of Christ’s deity, one must acknowledge that Jesus is God and therefore possesses all of God’s attributes, including omniscience. Theologians, however, make a distinction between Christ having divine attributes and Him employing those attributes. Christ indeed possesses omniscience, but chooses not to enjoy that privilege. He voluntarily limits Himself in this respect.[[28]](#footnote-28) In chapter 10, “The Humanity of Christ,” we will pick up on this topic again.

Another quandary consists of the question, “If Yahweh promises to forget our sins (see Heb 8:12), then how can we claim that He knows everything? He must know about them and remember them. Here the matter is not God’s literally forgetting our sins, but that He does not count them against us. Jeremiah 7:31 is also problematic: “They have built the high places of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, and it did not come into My mind.” Does this mean that the Lord cannot imagine such a thing? Of course, He can. This is merely an anthropomorphic expression of His disgust and disapproval.[[29]](#footnote-29)

How does Yahweh’s omniscience interact with His other attributes? His omniscience coincides with His omnipresence. An omnipresent God has access to all information. Regarding Yahweh’s omniscience and His almighty power, we make the qualification that all that God knows does not necessarily come to pass. His knowledge does not always motivate Him to action. He moves in response to His will, not His knowledge.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Concerning His eternal nature, God’s timelessness corresponds to the concept of His immediate knowledge. If God exists outside of time, then time cannot hinder His direct access to any knowledge.[[31]](#footnote-31) However, the Scriptures often refer to God’s “foreknowledge.” If God exists outside of time, then that term poorly describes His relation to future events, since “foreknowledge” implies that God has a future. We conclude that this term is more a condescension to people’s perspective of time than describing God’s relationship to it.[[32]](#footnote-32)

**b. The “Openness of God”**

**1) Description and Support**

In recent years, a new movement has arisen theorizing that Yahweh does not know the future. This movement is named the “openness of God,” or “openness theology.” The issue is whether God’s knowledge of the future contradicts human freedom. Can a person act contrary to what the Lord has foreknown about this individual’s future? If we answer, “No,” then it seems that a person has no true freedom of choice – everything is predetermined by God. If we reply, “Yes,” then it appears that Yahweh does not know the future and that people can do things that He does not expect them to do. The first solution violates human freedom, while the second challenges God’s perfection.

This dilemma does not trouble Calvinists, since they believe that Yahweh directly controls all events that occur in the universe and do not recognize true human freedom. For adherents of the Arminian view, however, who hold to freedom of will, this question can pose a dilemma. They must either admit that God does not know the future, or explain how God’s knowledge of future events does not predetermine human behavior or violate people’s freedom of choice.

How do proponents of openness theology defend their view? John Sanders notes that in Scripture God acts in history. He reacts to people’s actions, adjusts His plan accordingly, learns new information, is sometimes uncertain about the future, and expresses emotions like surprise, displeasure, regret, and grief. For Sanders, all these phenomena indicate that God does not know the future.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Another openness theologian, Gregory Boyd, advances the following argument.[[34]](#footnote-34). If God foreknew that in the future most people would reject the gospel and eternally perish, then why did He create such a world? Does He not want all to be saved? He also notes instances in Scripture where, in his opinion, God unsuccessfully attempted to turn people from their wicked ways (e.g. Acts 7:51; Rom 10:21; Heb 3:7-19; Ezek 22:30). Yet, if God already foreknew that they would not turn, then why did He make the attempt?

Furthermore, Boyd objects that if God truly seeks a relationship of love with people, then there must be true mutual interaction between them. Consequently, human decisions must actually have an effect on Him. Followers of this teaching are not concerned that, without knowledge of the future, Yahweh will lose control over the world. He possesses adequate intelligence to “anticipate and prepare for each and every possibility as effectively as if it was a certainty.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Boyd is ready to concede, though, that God may on occasion predetermine some event in order to guarantee the success of His plan. However, this is not His usual approach.

In addition, Boyd assumes that if God anticipates that a certain story line would interfere with His plan, He would act to prevent that story line from being realized. In answer to the question why God tolerates people who abuse their freedom for evil purposes, Boyd claims, “God cannot revoke the capacity to choose for or against love once he has given it,”[[36]](#footnote-36) and, “the self-determining freedom of wicked moral agents is irrevocable.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

Boyd also appeals to the practice of prayer. If God’s plan in predetermined, what sense is there to ask Him to change something? In addition, if people’s decisions are also predetermined, then why does God test people? He already knows how they will respond. Moreover, Peter writes about the possibility of hastening the coming of the Lord (2 Pet 3:11-12). If that date is fixed, however, how can we hasten it? Finally, Boyd claims that “we do not discover what the future holds; we help decide what the future holds.”[[38]](#footnote-38) God created us to co-reign with Him. In giving us freedom, He anticipated that we would be co-workers with Him in establishing His kingdom on earth.

Adherent of openness theology attempt to deny Yahweh’s knowing the future, yet at the same time they defend His omniscience. They claim that not knowing events that have not yet occurred does not disqualify God from being all-knowing. Future event do not yet exist in reality. Ignorance of them, therefore, does not diminish God’s omniscience.[[39]](#footnote-39) In support, openness theologians cite Aristotle, who defined truth as a statement that corresponds to reality. However, one cannot characterize future events as “true” or “false.” Therefore, one may be ignorant of them without lacking knowledge of the truth.

Proponents also compare God’s “openness” with God’s omnipotence. In our discussion of the latter, we will make the qualification that God can only do what is logically possible. For example, He cannot make a square circle. Correspondingly, He can only know that which is possible to know.[[40]](#footnote-40)

Others ascribe to Yahweh so-called “conditional knowledge,” which means that He knows with precision only that which He Himself will do. In relation to others, though, the Lord can only anticipate what might happen based on the conditions at hand. It is “conditional knowledge,” or knowledge based on probability.

Although Yahweh operates on the principle of probability, this does not hinder His plans since He knows all that could possibly happen. In other words, He can take into consideration all possible results from any free choice made by any person at any time. With the aid of His exhaustive understanding, He knows how to execute His plan in spite of any contrary decision people might make. Whatever people might do, Yahweh has already considered that variant and knows how to respond to attain His ultimate goal.

Some supports of this theory posit the idea of God’s “intentional ignorance.” Yahweh could know the future, but He has decided to remain in ignorance concerning people’s decisions so that they may exercise genuine freedom. In other words, God refrains from knowing the future, although He is capable of it.

Finally, Boyd argues that God’s omniscience includes the knowledge that it is impossible to foreknow people’s future free decisions. Therefore, the Lord knows all things, including the fact that He cannot know all that the future holds.[[41]](#footnote-41)

**2) Refutation**

All of the above-listed arguments fail to overturn the clear biblical teaching that Yahweh precisely knows future events. Through Isaiah, He says, “Behold, the former things have come to pass, now I declare new things; before they spring forth I proclaim {them} to you” (Isa 42:9). In his day, David acknowledged God’s foreknowledge, exclaiming, “Even before there is a word on my tongue, behold, O Yahweh, You know it all” (Ps 139:4). We could also cite such passages as Dan 2:28, Isa 46:9-10, and others previously mentioned in support of our position.

Fulfillment of prophecy also confirms Yahweh’s perfect knowledge of the future. He is able to accurately predict future events. In addition, some texts demonstrate that God knows people’s future decisions (see Mk 14:13, 72; Acts 2:23; Rev 13:8). It is undisputable that God knows all that He Himself with do. At the same time, He knows what others will do as well.[[42]](#footnote-42) In response to those who say omniscience is merely the *ability* to know all things, we affirm that omniscience, by definition, is the *actual knowledge* of all things. The Lord is not only able to possess all knowledge, He really possesses it.[[43]](#footnote-43)

When Scripture portrays Yahweh as one who changes His plan in response to changing situations or people’s decisions, we are dealing again with an anthropomorphic description of the Almighty. The Old Testament abounds with anthropomorphisms, including ascribing to God human body parts.

Opponents of openness theology object that if Yahweh does not know the future, then He would not act so passively toward evil in the world. According to the traditional view, God allows evil in the world because He sees the “bigger picture” and knows that there will be a good result in the end. If Yahweh does not know this for certain, however, then He should be striving at maximum capacity to eliminate evil as soon as possible in order to guarantee the success of His plan. Yet, He does not do so, but is long-suffering toward evil.[[44]](#footnote-44)

In addition, if Boyd supposes that the Lord can “anticipate and prepare for each and every possibility as effectively as if it was a certainty” and nullify any story line that undermines His plan, then he encounters a contraction in his system. Boyd previously objected that if God foreknew that most people would reject Him, then He would not have created the world as He did. However, the fact is that few will find the path to life (Matt 7:14). This undermines Boyd’s claim that Yahweh can “anticipate and prepare for each and every possibility” and alter His plan toward a successful result, since he would not consider the result Jesus predicted a positive one. In addition, if God does not know the future, how could Jesus have predicted that in the end few would be saved?

Moreover, in response to Boyd’s statements that “God cannot revoke the capacity to choose for or against love once he has given it,” and, “the self-determining freedom of wicked moral agents is irrevocable,” we simply ask, “Why must this be so?”

Helseth, commenting on Boyd’s claim that God sometimes does predetermine human choices in order to guarantee His plan, points out that this admission by Boyd deals a devastating blow to his entire system. Even Boyd is not certain that Yahweh can reach His goals without some sort of foreknowledge or compulsion on His part.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Erickson objects that if God does not know the future, then how can He answer prayer? If He is not in complete control, then instances may occur where all He can do is “try” to answer prayer. In addition, if He cannot foresee the end, then how does He know how best to answer prayer since He Himself does not know what will be the best result.[[46]](#footnote-46)

**3) Omniscience and Human Freedom**

Those who believe that God truly knows the future propose various explanations as to how to reconcile this truth with the fact of human freedom. One theory is called “compatibilistic freedom.” According to this understanding, God arranges the conditions of people’s lives in a way that they will “freely” choose the option that He desires them to choose and foreknew they would choose, since it is the only option He leaves open to them.[[47]](#footnote-47) The problem here, however, is whether one can consider this true freedom of choice.

Lutheran theologian Francis Pieper holds to an agnostic view, which refuses to resolve the apparent conflict between the Lord’s foreknowledge and human freedom. He writes, “We must either join Cicero, the Socinians, et alii and sacrifice the infallible and absolute omniscience or become Stoics and deny the freedom of human action and man’s responsibility for his sin. But on the basis of Scripture we must maintain both, even though in this life we cannot harmonize the apparent contradictions.”[[48]](#footnote-48) Although this position does not contradict biblical teaching, we would prefer a more substantial effort to resolve the dilemma.

Most likely, the optimal solution is to defend the thesis that God’s foreknowledge simply does not compel people to make the choices that they make. For example, the Lord knows His own future choices, but they are not forced, but free. In a similar way, the Lord’s foreknowledge of human choices does not violate their freedom.[[49]](#footnote-49)

Nash feels that just as one person’s observation of another’s behavior does not determine that behavior, when God in eternity “looks” upon the events of history (which are past, present, and future from our perspective), His observation of them is not the reason why they took place.[[50]](#footnote-50)

Therefore, we can confidently claim that when people make decisions, they do so by their own free volition. Their choices are not determined by the Lord, but by they themselves. The fact that God foreknew their choices in no way contradicts the idea that they were freely made.

To summarize, in response to the question, “Could someone have made a decision contrary to the one which the Lord foreknew?” we answer in the negative. However, we are not promoting determinism, but simply explain that a person cannot make a decision different from the one he or she has already made, which the Lord foreknew, but did not predetermine.[[51]](#footnote-51)

A number of respected theologians join us in our conclusion. Francis Pieper states, “Though the omniscience of God extends over all things without exception, it is not the efficient cause of the things which it knows.”[[52]](#footnote-52) Thiessen aptly summarizes, “Free actions do not take place because they are foreseen, but they are foreseen because they will take place.”[[53]](#footnote-53) Hodge adds, “An act may be certain as to its occurrence, and yet free as to the mode of its occurrence.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Shedd confirms, “It is knowledge that is confined to divine understanding and never causes an act of the will.”[[55]](#footnote-55) Finally, Erickson writes, “The usual form of the Arminian position says that there is no inconsistency between God knowing what I am going to do and my being free in doing it, so long as it is I, not God, who determines it.”[[56]](#footnote-56)

1. Later in the Old Testament, we again encounter mention of God’s wisdom in creation: “Yahweh by wisdom founded the earth, by understanding He established the heavens” (Prov 3:19); and “{It is} He who made the earth by His power, who established the world by His wisdom; and by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens” (Jer 10:12) (see Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 120). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 168; Chafer L. S. Systematic Theology. – Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-1948. – V. 1. – P. 193; Packer J. I. Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs. – Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1993. – P. 31-32; Henry C. F. H. God, Revelation, and Authority. – Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1976-1983. – V. 5. – P. 268; Hodge C. Systematic Theology, 1897. – V. 1. – P. 396-397; Strong A. H. Systematic Theology. – 1886. – P. 282; Pieper F. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MI: Concordia Publishing House, 1953. – V. 1. – P. 447-452. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mueller, p. 168; Chafer, v. 1, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Mueller, p. 168; Henry, v. 5, p. 268-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Chafer, v. 1, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Isa 37:26-28; 41:25; 42:9; 44:7, 26-27; 45:21; 46:8-10; 48:3. The abundance of fulfilled prophecies in the Old Testament also testify to Yahweh’s perfect knowledge of future events. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Boyd G. A. God Limits His Control // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Kindle Edition, 3967-4164; Erickson M. J. God the Father Almighty. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998. – P. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Henry, v. 5, p. 268-269; Mueller, p. 168; Strong, p. 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mueller, p. 168; Thiessen H. C. Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology – Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949. – P. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Chafer, v. 1, p. 200; Shedd W., Thayer G., Gomes A. W. Dogmatic Theology. – 3rd ed. – Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003. – P. 286-287; Duffield G. P. Van Cleave N. M. Foundations of Pentecostal Theology. – Los Angeles, CА: L.I.F.E. Bible College, 1983. – P. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hodge, v. 1, p. 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Strong, p. 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Grudem, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Pieper, v. 1, p. 448. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Grudem, p. 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Henry, v. 5, p. 270. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hodge, v. 1, p. 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Craig W. L. God Directs All Things on Behalf of a Molinist View of Providence // Boyd G., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. Kindle Edition, 1707-1715. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Mueller, p. 168; Thiessen, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mueller, p. 168; Henry, v. 5, p. 268-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Mueller, p. 168; Chafer, v. 1, p. 193. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Hodge, v. 1, p. 398-400. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Strong, p. 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Henry, v. 5, p. 272. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 2. – P. 710-711. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Grudem, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Henry, v. 5, p. 277; Strong, p. 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Henry, v. 5, p. 276-277. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Henry, v. 5, p. 282-283; Pieper, v. 1, p. 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Sanders J. The God who risks. – Downer’s Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1998. – P. 39-139. Noted in Highfield R. God Controls by Liberating // Boyd G., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011. Kindle Edition, 2929-2934. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Boyd, God Limits His Control, 3967-4139. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., 4127-4129. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 4046-4052. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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39. Noted in Jowers D. W. Conclusion // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. W. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Zondervan, 2011, Kindle Edition, 4995-4997. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Chafer, v. 1, p. 195. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Boyd, God Limits His Control, 3938-3939. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Henry, v. 5. p. 278-279; Strong, p. 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Chafer, v. 1, p. 195; Strong, p. 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Noted in Craig W. L. Response to Gregory A. Boyd // Boyd G., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011, Kindle Edition, 4677-4679; Helseth P. K. God Causes All Things // Boyd G. A., Craig W. L., Helseth P. K., Highfield R., Jowers D. Four Views on Divine Providence – Zondervan, 2011, Kindle Edition, 742-745; Helm P. The Providence of God. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1993. – P. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Helseth, God Causes All Things, 714-717. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Erickson, God the Father Almighty, p. 91, 284-285. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Pieper, v. 1, p. 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
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51. Henry, v. 5, p. 282. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Pieper, v. 1, p. 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Thiessen, p. 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Hodge, v. 1, p. 401. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Shedd, p. 287. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Erickson, God the Father Almighty, p. 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)