

ANATOMY OF AN ANTHROPOMORPHISM: DOES GOD DISCOVER FACTS?

Robert B. Chisholm Jr.

SEVERAL PASSAGES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT seem to depict God as less than omniscient. Most of these pertain to God's knowledge of the future, but some seem to indicate that even His knowledge of present realities is less than exhaustive. For example in Genesis 18:20–21 the Lord announced, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so blatant that I must go down and see if they are as wicked as the outcry suggests. If not, I want to know."¹ The Lord was aware that a problem existed in the twin cities, but before unleashing His judgment He decided to observe the situation firsthand in order to know for sure how bad it was and what degree of judgment, if any, was warranted. In Genesis 22 God tested Abraham's loyalty (v. 1) and then pronounced through His angel, "Now I know that you fear God" (v. 12). The temporal adverb "now" (עַתָּה) gives the impression God had discovered information He did not previously know.

What is one to make of these texts, which seem to fly in the face of the classic understanding of God's omniscience? Traditionally most theologians have labeled this presentation of God as anthropomorphic. But some respected Old Testament theologians argue that these passages are ontological windows into the divine nature that must be taken at face value. Commenting on Genesis 22:12 Brueggemann states, "It is not a game with God. God genuinely does not know. And that is settled in verse 12, 'Now I know.' There is a real development in the plot. The flow of the narrative accomplishes something in the awareness of God. He did not know. Now he knows."²

Robert B. Chisholm Jr. is Chair and Professor of Old Testament Studies, Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.

¹ Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The NET Bible*.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 187.

Referring to Genesis 18 and 22 as well as other passages, Goldingay argues that these texts “will show that God has extraordinary knowledge, but will incorporate no declaration that Yhwh is omniscient, and preclude that by the way they portray God acting so as to discover things.”³ Goldingay concedes that “talk of God acting to find something out is anthropomorphism,” but he quickly adds, “Such anthropomorphisms presumably tell us something true about God’s relationship with the world.” Then he writes, “In dialogue with Greek thinking, Christian tradition let God’s possession of supernatural knowledge turn into God’s possession of all knowledge. It thereby let that override the good news of the correlative evidence in Scripture that God does not always know everything and that God finds things out.”⁴

Unlike Brueggemann and Goldingay, evangelical open theists affirm that God’s knowledge of the present is exhaustive. As for the future, He knows what can be known, but this does not include the actions of free beings because, open theists argue, these do not become part of a knowable reality until they actually materialize in space and time. Open theists appeal to Genesis 22:12 in support of their position, arguing that a straightforward reading of the passage indicates that God was not certain of Abraham’s faithfulness until He put the patriarch to the test.⁵

This article examines the phenomenon of divine uncertainty and discovery from a literary-exegetical perspective and proposes a hermeneutical model for understanding these texts that is consistent with the traditional position. Not being an open theist, the present writer starts with the assumption, based on the preponderance of the biblical evidence, that ontologically God is omniscient in the classical sense.⁶ Genesis 18:21 and 22:12 do indeed

³ John Goldingay, *Israel’s Gospel*, vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 137–38.

⁵ See, for example, John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 52–53; and Gregory A. Boyd, *God of the Possible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 64.

⁶ For summaries of the evidence in this regard see John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 486–94; and Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 39–60. Of course theoretically one could interpret and integrate this evidence differently than the classical position has done. For example one could (a) resist the urge to harmonize the data and simply live with the resulting tension, (b) argue that texts depicting God as omniscient are hyperbolic, or (c) propose that God, in anticipation of the Incarnation, imposed limitations on His own knowledge in particular circumstances, perhaps for the sake of facilitating a dynamic relationship with humans.

present God anthropomorphically. However, one must ask, Why would God reveal Himself as if He were not omniscient? Some theologians have suggested He must do this in order to accommodate Himself to humankind's limited understanding.⁷ However, those who make this proposal seem to understand the truth that God knows all things. If that is the case, then the anthropomorphic language, rather than facilitating understanding, seems to complicate matters.

A better explanation is needed for why God revealed Himself to Abraham (and the readers of Abraham's story) as if He were less than omniscient. This article proposes that the literary context of each passage provides the key to understanding why God did this. In each case God's anthropomorphic self-revelation occurs within a metaphorical framework that is inherently relational in nature. God assumes a relational role and then speaks in a way that is consistent with it. Through His anthropomorphic self-revelation God made it clear that His relationship with Abraham was personal and dynamic. The metaphor boldly fleshes out the underlying reality. By revealing Himself in this way God also emphasized the importance of human responsibility. Human decisions would play a formative role in how the future of Abraham and his world would unfold. God grants human beings, whom He has made in (or as) His image, the dignity of causality. His plan for human history accommodates human decisions and actions, as well as His own responses to them.⁸

In understanding God's anthropomorphic self-revelation, it is also important to examine the speech function of God's words. When God speaks within a metaphorical framework, His words may veil certain aspects of the divine nature, but they have a specific function to perform that contributes powerfully to His purpose(s) in the world of the narrative. In a recently published volume the present author discusses how attention to language function can help in the interpretation of texts like Genesis 18:21 and 22:12 in which God's omniscience seems to be compromised.⁹ Building on that foundational exegetical work, this article ad-

⁷ See, for example, Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1994), 52, who cites John Calvin on the subject.

⁸ In this regard see Richard L. Pratt Jr., "Historical Contingencies and Biblical Predictions," in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Walke*, ed. J. I. Packer and S. K. Soderlund (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 180–203. Pratt, a Reformed theologian, appeals to the Westminster Confession (V. 2) for support.

⁹ Robert B. Chisholm, *Interpreting the Historical Books: An Exegetical Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006), 62–68.

dresses its relevance to the open theism debate that has occurred in evangelicalism in recent years.

SCOPING OUT SODOM: DIVINE UNCERTAINTY AND DISCOVERY IN GENESIS 18

Before making an attempt to interpret the Lord's statement in Genesis 18:21, one must first examine the immediately preceding context. When the Lord visited Abraham at Mamre (v. 1), He appeared in human form, accompanied by two angels (v. 2).¹⁰ During the meal the Lord announced that Sarah would soon have a son. Eavesdropping on the conversation, Sarah laughed to herself (v. 12, וַתִּצְחַק שָׂרָה בְּקִרְבָּה, "and Sarah laughed within herself"), and she thought, "After I am worn out will I have pleasure, especially when my husband is old too?" At this point the Lord, demonstrating supernatural capacity to read another's thoughts, challenged Sarah's lack of faith and affirmed His ability to accomplish the seemingly impossible (vv. 13–14).

Read in isolation, the episode does not prove divine omniscience, but it certainly portrays the Lord as at least having supernatural mental capacities, as if He were omniscient. Furthermore the statement in verse 13 stands in stark contrast to what the Lord said in verse 21. Juxtaposing the texts gives the impression the Lord could read minds, at least of those in the next room, but yet He did not seem fully aware of what had been and was going on down in Sodom. This seems incongruous.

The key to resolving the problem is to take into account the rhetorical nature of speech. Macky observes that language has multiple purposes: presentative, expressive, evaluative, performative, dynamic, exploratory, relational.¹¹ The Lord's question in verse 13 is best taken as both expressive and dynamic. Expressive

¹⁰ Verse 2 states that Abraham saw three men, one of whom was apparently the Lord (vv. 13–15). Verse 16 describes the men getting up to leave, while verse 22a says that they turned and headed toward Sodom. One gets the impression that all three went on their way, but according to verse 22b Abraham was still in the Lord's presence. In 19:1 "the two angels" arrived in Sodom. The best way to harmonize the evidence is to assume that the "three men" who came to Mamre were the Lord and two angels. After the meal with Abraham, the two angels left Abraham and proceeded to Sodom, while the Lord remained with Abraham. This is why *The NET Bible* translates "the two men turned" in 18:22a (the Hebrew text has simply "the men"). Abraham seems to have recognized the Lord, for he addressed Him in verse 3 with אֲדֹנָי ("Lord"), a title reserved for God. (The pointing may reflect later scribal interpretation in that the original reading may have been אֲדֹנִי, "my lord.")

¹¹ Peter W. Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Thought: A Method for Interpreting the Bible* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 16–17.

language verbalizes one's feelings; the Lord's question verbalizes His emotional response (disappointment? dismay? outrage?) to Sarah's cynicism. At the same time the statement is dynamic; it is intended to impact the hearers in a significant way.¹² As Macky points out, dynamic language can be affective ("aimed at arousing emotions"), pedagogical ("intended to illuminate darkness"), or transforming ("intended to change hearers' attitudes, values and commitments, often by first arousing emotion and illuminating the darkness").¹³

Here the Lord revealed the ontological reality of His omniscience because this display of supernatural knowledge served to enhance His credibility as the one who had promised a child. The rhetorical function of the question was to transform the hearers' attitudes and stimulate their faith; after all, since the Lord can read minds, He can cause an aging woman to conceive. Yet, as will be argued later, the Lord veiled His omniscience in verse 21 because His rhetorical purpose was different in that situation.

After the meal the visitors got up to leave (v. 16a). The narrator wrote parenthetically (note the disjunctive clausal structure with fronted subject) that Abraham was accompanying them with the intention of giving them a proper sendoff (v. 16b). Before resuming the story, the narrator supplied more supplemental information (note the disjunctive clause at the beginning of v. 17). It is difficult to know exactly where the parenthesis ends and the main line of the narrative resumes. Possibly verses 20–21 belong with 17–19, but another option is that the parenthesis ends after verse 19 and that the *wayyiqtol* form at the beginning of verse 20 resumes the narrative. In this case verses 17–19 may flash back to a time before the Lord's arrival (the perfect verbal form occurs in the introduction to the quotation in v. 17a). In either case the words of verses 20–21 must have been spoken in Abraham's hearing because they reveal the Lord's plan (cf. v. 17),¹⁴ and Abraham's question in verse 23 makes sense only if he had heard the Lord's statement about Sodom and Gomorrah.¹⁵

¹² Macky explains that "speaking expressively is verbalizing our feelings without any concern to affect others." Yet he adds, "Very often such expressive speech is integrated with other kinds when we know others hear us" (ibid., 16).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ See John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 168.

¹⁵ This means that the descent mentioned in verse 21 is from Mamre to Sodom and Gomorrah, not from heaven to earth.

In verse 21 the Lord's words suggest that He was on a fact-finding mission. The verb רָאָה , when collocated with the interrogative הֲ , invariably means "see if" and refers to discovering information.¹⁶ The first person prefixed verbal form (imperfect or cohortative) of רָאָה (cf. אֶרְאֶה in v. 21) carries different shades of meaning, including among others "know for sure" (15:8; 24:14; 42:33–34), "know more fully" (Exod. 33:13), "find out, discover" (Num. 22:19; 1 Sam. 22:3), "to experience" (Isa. 47:8), and "be aware of" (Ps. 51:3). Since the Lord had some awareness of the situation in the twin cities (Gen. 18:20) at the time He spoke these words, the words "know for sure" fit nicely in verse 21. However, this implies that He lacked full knowledge of the situation, contrary to what one would expect the omniscient God to possess.

Why did God speak this way? To answer this question, the metaphorical framework of the Lord's statement must first be considered. The context depicts the Lord in the role of cosmic judge. When Abraham heard the Lord speak of the moral condition of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham interceded on behalf of the cities because of his concern for the well-being of Lot and his family. He asked rhetorically, "Will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right?" (v. 25).¹⁷ Judges, at least those committed to justice, typically get the facts straight before they issue a ruling and execute justice. The language of verse 21 has a legal connotation. Several verses associate seeing (רָאָה) with judging (Exod. 5:21; 1 Sam. 24:15 [Heb., v. 16]; 2 Chron. 19:6; Lam. 3:59). Exodus 3:9 describes the people's "cry" (צַעֲקָה) coming before (בְּרֹא אֵל) the Lord in conjunction with His seeing (רָאָה) the oppression of His people. Both the Lord's words and Abraham's response strongly suggest that the Lord assumed a judicial role here and spoke accordingly.

The language function of the Lord's statement in verses 20–21 must also be evaluated. His words were not presentative (simply intended to communicate information, like an evening weather re-

¹⁶ In addition to Genesis 18:21 this collocation occurs seven times: Genesis 8:8; Exodus 4:18; Numbers 11:23; Esther 3:4; Psalms 14:2; 53:2; Song of Songs 6:11. The collocation $\text{לֹא אִם . . . הֲ . . . רָאָה}$ occurs in Numbers 11:23, meaning "see whether or not." The collocation $\text{לֹא וְאִם . . . הֲ}$ (note the conjunction prefixed to אִם) appears only here and in Genesis 4:7, where (unlike 18:21) it follows an interrogative clause. In both texts a contrast is in view that may be expressed by the translation "otherwise" in the second clause.

¹⁷ According to 18:19 the Lord intended Abraham to teach his offspring to obey the Lord "by doing what is right and just" ($\text{לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט}$). Ironically in verse 25 the patriarch challenged God to "do what is right" ($\text{לַעֲשׂוֹת מִשְׁפָּט}$). See Thomas M. Bolin, "The Role of Exchange in Ancient Mediterranean Religion and Its Implications for Reading Genesis 18–19," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29 (2004): 51.

port). The Lord considered it appropriate to share His intentions with Abraham (v. 17), which suggests that the language was dynamic and motivational.¹⁸ Perhaps the Lord wanted to prepare Abraham emotionally to accept predetermined divine judgment. The angels' words to Lot in 19:13–14 may imply this was the case, but they do not necessarily carry such an implication.¹⁹ If judgment was not a foregone conclusion (at least from a historical perspective) before the angels' arrival, then it is possible the Lord's words in 18:20–21 were designed to motivate Abraham to assume the role of intercessor and to prompt the response they elicited.²⁰

At the very least the Lord's words, when heard within the metaphorical framework of His role as judge, should have convinced Abraham of the Lord's fairness (clearly a concern of the patriarch; cf. 18:25). But the Lord's words also carry an important implication. It is clear that the people of Sodom were responsible before God. The Lord would not arbitrarily destroy them. As a fair and just judge, He would examine the evidence and then reward their deeds appropriately. The anthropomorphic language veils the ontological reality of God's omniscience, but the Lord seems to have been more concerned in this context with revealing Himself as a fair judge, emphasizing the importance of human responsibility and inviting Abraham to assume the role of an intercessor.

How have others dealt with the anthropomorphic language of 18:20–21? Carasik articulates the problem in a coherent manner, but his proposed solution, while on the right track, fails to go far enough. He deals with the issue strictly at a literary level, stating, "I think God has to go to Sodom and Gomorrah to see what was happening there in order to give Abraham the opportunity to bargain. That is, God's omniscience was limited by the author of this story for narrative reasons."²¹ Certainly in the world of the narra-

¹⁸ Bolin attempts to show that the Lord's dialogue with Abraham reflects a pattern of "exchange" that is evident in ancient religion in the Mediterranean region. In matters of justice, he argues, "honor, shame, and reciprocity" are key elements "in understanding how the relationship between humanity and divinity was understood" (ibid., 42). If this is the case, then it is not surprising that dialogue with the patriarch is a central element in the Lord's self-revelation.

¹⁹ For a fuller discussion see Chisholm, *Interpreting the Historical Books*, 64.

²⁰ See Terence E. Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 49–50; and Samuel E. Balentine, *Prayer in the Hebrew Bible: The Drama of Divine-Human Dialogue* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 145.

²¹ Michael Carasik, "The Limits of Omniscience," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 232.

tive God's actions and words transcend mere "literary imperatives" (Carasik's phrase). Carasik's statement about giving Abraham the "opportunity to bargain" hints at the function of the language, but he drops the ball before reaching the goal line.

Frame emphasizes the judicial context of the passage, noting that the idiom of divine discovery often shows up in such contexts.²² This shows sensitivity to the metaphorical framework of the passage and is a significant step in the right direction. Despite the implications of the text's language Frame affirms that "the emphasis is not on God gaining information to complete his own understanding of the situation, but rather on God as prosecutor gathering evidence to present an indictment."²³ This is not evident from the wording of the passage, which clearly says that the Lord must "complete his own understanding" (וְאֵם לֹא אֶדְעָה) before He can "present an indictment." Perhaps this is why Frame quickly backpedals by saying, "Nevertheless, when taken literally, the verse does describe an increase in God's knowledge." At this point he appeals to the preponderance of the evidence for omniscience before affirming, "When God appears as a man, he has special reason to describe his knowledge in human terms."²⁴ But Frame never articulates what that reason is. He departs from the world of the narrative and wanders down a philosophical trail, talking about theophany anticipating the Incarnation and theorizing about the implications of God's immanence. None of this clarifies how anthropomorphic language functions in the context of the Lord's encounter with Abraham, who was surely more concerned about Lot's destiny than about God's "theophanic incarnation" and "immanence in time" (Frame's phrases).

In a more helpful analysis Craig observes that "the fundamental flaw" of the hermeneutic underlying the straightforward reading of the text "is its failure to appreciate that the Bible is not a textbook in systematic theology or philosophy of religion but that it is largely a collection of *stories* about God's dealings with men."²⁵ Craig then asks, "But what then . . . is the truth communicated by such anthropomorphic portrayals of God?" He answers, "In general,

²² John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 194–95; and idem, *The Doctrine of God*, 495.

²³ Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, 496.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ William Lane Craig, "'A Middle Knowledge Response' to 'The Open Theism View,'" in *Divine Foreknowledge: Four Views*, ed. James K. Bielby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 59 (italics his).

the truth communicated to us by these passages is that God's sovereignty does not consist of blind decrees operating irrespective of free human responses; rather, God's decrees take into account and are conditioned by the free acts of creatures."²⁶

Craig emphasizes the relational dynamic of "God's dealings with men" and the role of human responsibility. These themes resonate in the world of the narrative—Abraham was concerned about Lot and challenged God to be fair. He discovered that Sodom was responsible before God and he assumed a role in the unfolding drama by interceding before Him. God's anthropomorphic self-revelation, presented within a metaphorical judicial framework utilizing legal idiom and functional language, facilitated Abraham's understanding of the truths of divine justice and human responsibility.

TESTING ABRAHAM'S LOYALTY: DIVINE UNCERTAINTY AND DISCOVERY IN GENESIS 22

At the beginning of Abraham's story the Lord announced His intention to make Abraham into a great nation (Gen. 12:1–3). The Lord eventually expanded His promise to include permanent possession of the chosen land, as well as innumerable descendants (13:14–17). In response to Abraham's faith (15:6) the Lord affirmed His promise to give him the land (vv. 17–21; cf. 12:7). But ratification of the promise in its expanded form (numerous offspring and perpetual possession of the land) was contingent on Abraham demonstrating His loyalty to the Lord (17:1–16; cf. 22:16–18; 26:5).²⁷ At the start of Genesis 22 the promise had not yet been ratified; the Lord was ready to test Abraham's loyalty once and for all.

The chapter begins with a summary statement of what follows: "Some time after these things God tested Abraham." In light of the angel's declaration in verse 12, the verb נִסָּה ("tested") in verse 1 means "tested with a view to verifying (Abraham's loyalty)."²⁸ As verse 12 makes clear, the test was designed primarily for God's

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ For a fuller discussion of the nature and development of God's promises to Abraham see Robert B. Chisholm Jr., "Evidence from Genesis," in *A Case for Premillennialism: A New Consensus*, ed. Donald K. Campbell and Jeffrey L. Townsend (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 36–50.

²⁸ The angel represented God and spoke on His behalf, as the latter half of the statement shows: "because you did not withhold your son, your only son, from *me*" (italics added).

benefit, not Abraham's. The verb יָדָע, when used with God as subject, can refer to a test conducted for the benefit of the object (cf. Deut. 8:16), but usually God conducted the test for His own benefit. When used in this way, the verb is accompanied by a subordinate clause (often using a Qal infinitival form of יָדָע, "to know") that indicates the divine purpose of the test. Examples include Exodus 16:4, "whether they will walk in my law or not"; Deuteronomy 8:2, "to see [lit., 'to know'] if"; Deuteronomy 13:3 (Heb., v. 4); "to see [lit., 'to know'] if"; Judges 2:22; 3:4, "so the LORD would know"; and 2 Chronicles 32:31, "in order to know."

No such dependent clause appears in Genesis 22:1, but the angel's statement in verse 12 ("Now I know") indicates that the purpose of the test was to acquire the facts necessary to verify the truth. When used of human beings testing other human beings, the verb carries this sense ("test with a view to acquiring information") as well (Judg. 6:39; 1 Kings 10:1 [cf. v. 6]; Eccles. 2:1; 7:23; Dan. 1:12, 14).

The angel's statement, עַתָּה יָדַעְתִּי כִּי ("now I know that"), occurs in five other texts, which are instructive for understanding its meaning in Genesis 22:12.

Exodus 18:11: When Jethro heard the report of what the Lord had done for Moses and the Israelites (v. 9), he said, "Now I know that the LORD is greater than all the gods."

Judges 17:13: After Micah hired a Levite to serve in his family shrine, he mistakenly boasted, "Now I know God will make me rich."

First Samuel 24:20 (Heb., v. 21): Having been spared a second time by David, Saul admitted, "Now look, I realize [lit., 'know'] that you will in fact be king." The presence of הִנֵּה sets this example apart from the others syntactically. Saul may be saying, "Now [as opposed to before] I realize," but it is possible that the construction lays the logical basis for what follows: "Now look, I really do know that you will be king. . . . So now swear to me." In Deuteronomy 26:10 the construction הִנֵּה הָיָה עַתָּה ("Now look") introduces what logically follows, while in Jeremiah 40:4 it seems to emphasize the following statement.

First Kings 17:24: In response to Elijah's resuscitation of her son, the Sidonian widow declared, "Now I know that you are a prophet." (Here הִנֵּה, "this," follows עַתָּה, "here.")

Psalms 20:6 (Heb., v. 7): In confidence the psalmist affirmed, "Now I am sure [lit., 'I know'] that the LORD will deliver his chosen king."

In each case the statement is a response to a demonstration of the truth now known and may be translated, "Now I realize," "Now

I know for sure," or "Now I'm convinced." It implies an advance in knowledge and/or it expresses a confirmation of what was tentatively or less confidently held to be true.

What exactly did God claim to discover in Abraham's case? The noun clause after *וְכָתוּב* reads literally, "that a fearer of God (are) you." The expression *וְיָרָא אֱלֹהִים*, "fearer of God," describes an existing quality; it consists of a substantival participle in construct with a divine name functioning as an objective and specifying genitive. The expression, which appears in seven other passages (Exod. 18:21; Job 1:1, 8; 2:3; Ps. 66:16; Eccles. 7:18; 8:12), is always used of a character and/or lifestyle of moral integrity. Fearing God is a metonymy for reverence that results in obedience. Before confirming His promise to Abraham, God desired to know that Abraham was such a God-fearer. The test was designed to bring this character quality, if present, to the surface.

Of course from God's perspective such a test was unnecessary. In several passages individuals affirmed that God knows the inner character and thoughts of human beings (1 Chron. 29:17; Pss. 7:9 [Heb., v. 10]; 44:20–21 [Heb., vv. 21–22]; 94:11; 139:1–4; Jer. 20:12). In other verses God Himself said that He knows people's inner character and thoughts (1 Sam. 16:7; Jer. 17:10; Ezek. 11:5).²⁹

So in Genesis 22:12 why is God described as conducting a test to acquire information? As in Genesis 18 the context must be considered. As already noted, the story of Abraham tells how God established His covenant with the patriarch. When God chose Abraham to be His covenant partner, the arrangement was comparable to the suzerain-vassal treaty relationship attested in the ancient Near East. The story reaches its climax when Abraham demonstrated his loyalty (22:12, 15–18) by obeying God's command (cf. 26:5). God then elevated the patriarch to the status of a favored vassal who now possessed a ratified promise, comparable to the royal grants attested in the ancient Near East.³⁰ God contextualized His self-revelation to Abraham (and to the readers of the narrative) within the relational, metaphorical framework of a covenant lord. Thus one should not be surprised to hear Him speak in ways that reflect the relational role He assumed within this metaphorical framework.

²⁹ Carasik challenges the validity of the traditional interpretation of many of these passages ("The Limits of Omniscience," 223–26).

³⁰ On the covenant of grant model see Moshe Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90 (1970): 184–203.

A look at how kings sometimes spoke to their faithful subjects may illuminate God's statement in 22:12. The relationship between the Hittite king Suppiluliumas (early fourteenth century B.C.), who was suzerain over the city-state of Ugarit, and his vassal Niqmandu (sometimes spelled Niqmaddu), king of Ugarit, is instructive. On one occasion the neighboring kings of Nukhash and Mukish rebelled against their Hittite overlord and attempted to force Niqmandu to join their uprising. Suppiluliumas reminded Niqmandu of past relations between himself and Ugarit and urged Niqmandu to be loyal. "When Nukhash and Mukish make war with me—you, Niqmandu, do not fear them! Be inwardly confident! As your forefathers previously were at peace and not at war with Hatti, now you, Niqmandu, in the same way with my enemies be an enemy, and with my allies be an ally!"³¹

Niqmandu appealed for help to the Hittite king and affirmed his loyalty. "O Sun, Great King, my Lord—from the hands of the enemies deliver me! I am the servant of the Sun, the Great King, my Lord. With the enemies of my Lord I am an enemy, and with the allies of my Lord I am an ally. These kings are oppressing me."³²

Suppiluliumas acknowledged Niqmandu's loyalty. "And the kings, Nukhash and the king of Mukish, are oppressing Niqmandu, king of Ugarit, in the following manner: 'Why do you not turn aside from the Sun and be his enemy along with us?' But Niqmandu does not agree to be at enmity with the Sun, the Great King, his Lord. And the Sun, the Great King, has seen [*itamarma*] the loyalty of Niqmandu."³³

After Suppiluliumas quelled the rebellion, he rewarded Niqmandu with a sizable land grant. He also reaffirmed his relationship with his vassal and officially acknowledged Niqmandu's loyalty. "Niqmandu is with my enemies an enemy, and with my friends a friend. To the Sun, the Great King, his Lord, he is completely devoted and he will keep the treaty of friendship with Hatti. So the Sun, the Great King, has seen the loyalty of Niqmandu."³⁴

In the seventh century B.C. the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal informed Sin-tabni-usur, the prefect of Ur, that the prefect's ene-

³¹ *Le palais royal d'Ugarit*, IV, 35–36 (17.132:3–13) (author's translation).

³² *Ibid.*, IV, 49 (17.340:11–14) (author's translation).

³³ *Ibid.*, IV, 41 (17.227:7–16a) (author's translation).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, IV, 51 (17.340:11'b–15') (author's translation). For another translation see Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary*, trans. David E. Green (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 188.

mies had conspired against him, but he acknowledged the prefect's loyalty and assured him that the king's favor would extend to his children. "He and Ummanigash have conspired to bring about your death; but since I recognize [lit., 'know,' from *idû*] your loyalty, I have granted you (increased) favor . . . and the favors which I shall bestow on you shall be granted even unto the grandchildren."³⁵

No one of these texts uses language that is identical to the wording in Genesis 22:12, but they do include formal statements that the suzerain recognizes ("the Great King has seen," "I know") his subject's loyalty. Within the covenantal framework of God's relationship with Abraham, it is tempting to see the sentence "Now I know that you are a God-fearer (i.e., a loyal, obedient subject)" as an official statement acknowledging that Abraham had proved his loyalty in the midst of a crisis and was now worthy to receive a ratified promise.

What is the speech function of the Lord's declaration? The statement is not presentative (simply informative); it is evaluative ("the speaker [God] expresses his judgment on the quality of something [Abraham's character]").³⁶ It is also performative, which is "speech that directly performs some non-linguistic act, such as a judge decreeing, 'The defendant is acquitted.' Promises, invitations, proclamations, covenants and imperatives all fall into this category because they immediately change the personal, social, or legal, situation."³⁷ While the statement in verse 12 is not an oath as such, it is the prelude to the oath of ratification (vv. 15–18), and for those familiar with how covenantal relationships work it signals the fact that a monumental divine speech-act is imminent in response to Abraham's obedience.

So why did God veil His omniscience and reveal Himself as testing (v. 1) Abraham and as discovering the truth about His servant's character (v. 12, "Now I know that you fear God")? As in 18:21, by revealing Himself in this manner God made it clear that He was in a dynamic relationship with Abraham in which the patriarch's actions and responses would play a formative role in how the future unfolded. The Lord granted the dignity of causality to Abraham, His responsible covenantal partner. God's actions and words are consistent with the role of suzerain that He assumed,

³⁵ Robert H. Pfeiffer, *State Letters of Assyria* (New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society, 1935), 150 (letter 203).

³⁶ Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors*, 16.

³⁷ Ibid.

and the evaluative and performative language assured the patriarch that the promise was secure because of his loyalty. The episode, with its picture of God who evaluates and then rewards, should have reminded the ancient Israelite readers that they too were responsible to obey their covenant Lord, for the promise, though ratified, would not be experienced until they followed Abraham's example (cf. 18:18–19).

The approach taken here differs from the way this passage is usually handled. Typically interpreters affirm that the passage is anthropomorphic, but there is rarely any analysis of why anthropomorphic language is utilized, how it functions, or what its theological implications might be. When explanations are offered, they often are exegetically unsatisfying and display little if any awareness of the influence of historical-cultural factors or sensitivity to the function of metaphor and language in the world of the narrative.

For example, after making the important point that "God is changeable *in relationship* with his creation," Ware correctly affirms that God "does interact with his people in the experiences of their lives as these unfold in time." He then adds, "God actually enters into relationship with his people, while knowing from eternity all that they will face."³⁸ But then Ware paraphrases God's statement as follows: "In the experience of this action I (God) am witnessing Abraham demonstrate dramatically and afresh that he fears me, and I find this both pleasing and acceptable in my sight."³⁹ The problem with Ware's paraphrase is that it does not accurately reflect what the text says. "Now" does not merely mean "presently" (as the paraphrase "in the experience of this action" assumes); it means "now" as opposed to previously and indicates that a change has occurred. "I know" does not merely mean "I see" (as the paraphrase "I am witnessing" assumes). It means "I know for sure" or "I am convinced." Ware gives inadequate attention to contextual factors ("he tested" [v. 1] suggests a divine fact-finding mission has taken place), the implications of the covenantal metaphorical framework, and the function of the language.

Ware concludes, "Through Abraham's action of faith and fear of God, God sees and enters into the experience of this action of obedience, which action and heart of faith he has previously known fully and perfectly. What this kind of interpretation offers is a way

³⁸ Bruce A. Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 73 (italics his).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 73–74.

to understand the text as communicating *a present and experiential reality that is true of God* at the moment of Abraham's act of faith, while it also safeguards what Scripture elsewhere demands, the *previous full and perfect knowledge God had of Abraham's fear of him*.⁴⁰ God's statement, as interpreted by Ware, simply reflects what God was experiencing at that point in time. However, the language of the text suggests that God had learned something. Rather than dealing with the nuances of language function, Ware wants to take the statement as presentative (simply informative). He seems more concerned with making the language safe for orthodoxy than he is with wrestling with the purpose and implications of such bold anthropomorphic self-revelation. His recognition that God is relational is insightful and important, but he does not probe far enough into the nature of that relational dimension and what God's anthropomorphic self-revelation tells about it.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE OPEN THEISM DEBATE

This study of two key texts in Genesis has presented three arguments. First, one must recognize in each text that God acted and spoke within a metaphorical framework. In Genesis 18 He revealed Himself as royal judge, while in Genesis 22, as throughout the Abraham story, He was the patriarch's covenant lord. It should not be surprising that God, having contextualized His self-revelation within a metaphorical framework, acted and spoke in ways that are consistent with the role He assumed.

Second, in evaluating what God said, one must not assume the statements are presentative (simply informative). The language is functional in the world of the narrative, meaning it is accommodated to the metaphorical framework. In 18:21 God's words are dynamic; in 22:12 they are evaluative and performative. When language serves a function beyond being presentative, the truth of divine omniscience may be veiled.

Third, when God's anthropomorphic self-revelation is evaluated in the literary context and in the world of the narrative, it becomes apparent that it highlights the relational dynamic between God and His servant, as well as the importance of human responsibility. Through anthropomorphic self-revelation God made Himself a player in the unfolding drama, but He also made it clear that Abraham had an important role to play.

These conclusions have implications for the open theism de-

⁴⁰ Ibid., 74 (*italics his*).

bate. As noted earlier, open theists affirm that God's knowledge of the present is exhaustive. As for the future, He knows what can be known, but this does not include the free actions of humans because, open theists argue, these do not become part of a knowable reality until they actually materialize in space and time. Open theists sometimes appeal to Genesis 22:12 in support of their position, but, as pointed out, this verse, like 18:21, pertains to God's present, not future, knowledge. Presumably open theists explain this language of uncertainty and discovery in 18:21 as anthropomorphic. But the same hermeneutical model one utilizes to explain how anthropomorphism works in 18:21 can be applied to texts that seemingly limit God's knowledge of the future. As in 18:21 and 22:12, whenever God's knowledge (whether of the present or future) seems to be limited, God's self-revelation can be seen as contextualized within a metaphorical framework that utilizes functional language to highlight the relational dimension of God's interaction with the world and the importance of human responsibility in the outworking of His plan.

For example in Jeremiah 3:7a, 19b the Lord stated that He expected Israel to return to Him, recognize His authority, and be faithful to Him. But Israel persisted in idolatry. On the surface the verses seem to indicate that God was surprised at Israel's response, which was the opposite of what He anticipated. This seemingly implies that He did not know for sure how Israel would act.⁴¹

⁴¹ In this view the verb *אָמַר*, "and I said" (Jer. 3:7, 19), is understood in the sense of "I said (to myself)" or "I thought." The prefixed verbal forms *תָּשׁוּב* (v. 7), *תִּקְרָא* (v. 19, *qere*), and *תִּשְׁבֹּר* (v. 19, *qere*) are taken as simple futures, "she will return," "you will call," and "you will [not] return," respectively. One can circumvent the problem by understanding these verbs differently: (1) One can translate *אָמַר* in its usual sense, "I said," understanding it as a divine decree. (2) The imperfect *תָּשׁוּב* can be understood as an obligatory imperfect, "she must return." (3) The imperfect forms *תִּקְרָא* and *תִּשְׁבֹּר* can be understood as injunctive imperatives, "you must call, you must [not] return" or "call, do [not] return" (with an imperatival force).

In assessing this alternative interpretation of the verbs, the following observations are in order. First, while the form *אָמַר* need not refer to inner reflection, neither must it be understood as a decree formula. It occurs with God as subject only in these two verses in Jeremiah. Even if it is taken as "I said," it can still be harmonized with the open theist view. In this case the Lord would be voicing His expectations, not simply keeping them to Himself. Second, while the form *תָּשׁוּב* (v. 7) could theoretically be taken as obligatory, third-person prefixed forms of *שׁוּב* are never used this way elsewhere in Jeremiah (cf. 3:1; 8:4; 15:19; 22:10–11, 27; 23:20; 24:7; 26:3; 30:24; 31:8; 36:3, 7 [used here with *waw* to indicate purpose/result]; 40:5; 44:14, 28; 50:9). If the Lord intended to speak in a hortatory manner, it is more likely He would have used a second-person prefixed form (as in 4:1) or simply an imperative (as in 3:12, 14, 22; 18:11; 25:5; 31:21; 35:15). Third, the second-person imperatives in verse 19 could theoretically be taken as injunctive. In verse 4 the Lord said to Israel, "You call me 'My father.'" Here in verse 19 He could be making the point that words alone are not adequate; they must be supported by actions. In ad-

However, one must consider the metaphorical framework for the statements, as well as their speech function. In Jeremiah 2–5 the Lord compared His covenantal relationship with Israel to marriage. Like a new bride Israel once loved Him and followed Him (2:2). But then she became unfaithful and committed adultery with other gods (2:20, 24–25, 32–33; 3:1–2, 6–11, 20; 4:30; 5:7). Within this metaphorical framework the Lord spoke as a husband who has been rejected by the one he loves. In 3:19 the metaphor even gets mixed, as the Lord compared His relationship with Israel to that of a father and son. These familial metaphors become powerful vehicles by which God expressed His intense emotional response to wayward Israel. With regard to 3:19–20, Fretheim writes, “What intimacy God desired in his relationship with the people, and what disappointment is expressed here! While literary purists might deplore the mixing of the paternal and marital metaphors here, the effect is almost overwhelming in its pathos. God has been rejected both as parent and as husband!”⁴²

Within this familial framework, one expects to find very emotive language that extends beyond the presentative level. This framework provides the context in which the statements of God’s unrealized expectations should be evaluated. When viewed in isolation the statements are expressive of the hope and desire that a loving God has for a vibrant relationship with His people. The statements reflect what one would naturally expect a longing, hopeful husband or parent to say in such circumstances, as well as what he has every right to expect from his wife or child. One could paraphrase the statements as follows: “Even after she was unfaithful, I still expected her to come back to me [cf. v. 7]. I treated her as if she were my son. After all I did for her I naturally expected her to follow me [cf. v. 19].”

But the language is more than expressive. In their present context these statements are part of God’s accusation against His people (cf. vv. 7b, 20). As the backdrop for the accusations the statements of divine expectation highlight what was expected and should have happened. God had been violated, His anger was justified, and He had every right to threaten Israel with judgment. The statements of divine expectation contribute to the evaluative dimension of God’s accusation. In addition to expressing God’s love

dition to calling God their Father, they must be faithful to Him. However, since the statement is introduced in the same way as *וְהָיָה* is in verse 7 (cf. *וְהָיָה*), it seems more likely that the verbs also have a simple future force here.

⁴² Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 116.

for His people, they highlight the magnitude of their offense and the justice of God's case against them.

But this is not all. God is not simply decreeing judgment here. On the contrary, His intention is redemptive, as the repeated calls for wayward Israel to "return" to Him make clear (cf. 3:13–14, 22; 4:1). When juxtaposed with the calls to repentance, the statements of divine expectation also remind the people of God's continuing commitment to them and, as such, they have a dynamic or motivating function. It is simplistic and misleading to wrest such emotive, functional language from its metaphorical framework and literary context, read it as presentative, and conclude that God's knowledge of the future free actions of His creatures is somehow limited.

A FINAL APPEAL

In dealing with the Bible one should recognize the literary, contextualized nature of texts that describe God's relationship with His people. One should not assume that God's acts and words, when viewed or heard at the surface level, are ontological windows to the divine nature. One should probe deeper, considering the metaphorical framework in which God acts and speaks, as well as the function of His words. As this study has attempted to show, Genesis 18 and 22 are ontological windows that allow readers to see the divine nature. But what is actually seen differs from what may seem to be the case on the surface. The two passages are not proof texts that God's knowledge is limited, but neither should they be dismissed as mere anthropomorphisms. On the contrary they testify loudly and clearly that God desires to relate in meaningful ways to those whom He has granted the dignity of causality. To this end, His actions and words, though they may at times veil certain aspects of His nature (such as His omniscience), always express the truths He wants His people to understand in a given time and place, and reveal Him as He desires to be seen by them.

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