

Does God Know the Future?

The first argument with which to dispense is that which claims that God knows the future because people with finite minds cannot understand an infinite God. That truism invalidates all arguments including itself, not just its opponents. Rather, our objective is to determine that which can be concluded by god-given wisdom, and to leave the rest to God.

The second argument that is commonly used but fails in its logic is that, because God is omniscient, He knows everything, including the future. The same logic could be used to assert that God is omnipotent, so He can lie and be tempted by evil. Obviously (from Titus 1:2 and James 1:13), God can do only that which is consistent with His character. Whether knowledge of the future is within the nature of God is the question, the answer to which cannot be simply asserted without proof.

Arguments are made that God's knowledge of the future would infringe on free will. Reconciling the fact that the future changes with every choice and with every answered prayer requires that God already know what choices and requests will be made, so there is only one future. But if there is only one future, then our choices and requests are an illusion. And, since God would already know the evil that would be chosen, God would be guilty of the human legal concept of "depraved indifference," having the ability to prevent evil and doing nothing. Explanations exist to reconcile the concepts of knowledge of the future with free will, but the explanations are far from satisfactory. Nevertheless, if the Scriptures establish that God knows the future, then either the reconciliation is truly complicated, or the reconciliation is not knowable.

The Scriptures contain many predictions made by God. Either God knows the future and He could simply recite what He knew, or God has the ability and intelligence to cause His predictions to happen. Both explanations fit the data, so neither is supported nor disproved.

Many passages other than those concerned with predictions have been cited in support of God knowing the future. The following list is not complete, but serves to illustrate that each passage can be reconciled with either position. No passage specifically addresses whether God knows the future or whether God intervenes as necessary to make His plans and predictions become reality.

- Psalm 139 (v4) The fact that God knew what the psalmist would speak before he spoke it proves no more than God knew what he was thinking, as Jesus knew the thoughts of men. (v16) "Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance" in the context, tells that God knew the psalmist when he was still in his mother's womb. "And in Thy book they were all written, the days that were ordained, when as yet there was not one of them." This description of God's control should be placed in the same category as His planning for the Messiah, the eternal Kingdom on earth, and its citizens. God planned, wrote the plan, and executed the plan. The plan was unrolled in Revelation, when the Lamb was worthy to break its seals and reveal it. If the dates of our deaths were already written, then murder would not be a crime, since the victim was ordained to die on that day. Obviously, this is not the case.
- Isaiah 46:10 "Declaring the end from the beginning" does not tell whether God knew the outcome or if He planned and executed the outcome. The last phrase of the verse implies the latter.
- Jeremiah 1:5 "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the nations." This description is specific to Jeremiah, not everyone. God chose Jeremiah to be a prophet before he was born, much in the same way as God chose Jacob over Esau (Romans 9:11). This does not

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speaking to whether God knows the future, but to whether He selects certain people for certain jobs.

- Acts 2:23 “Delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.” This confirms that God was not surprised that Jesus was executed, and that it was part of His plan. The fact that such a large number of unlikely events, all predicted in advance, came to pass on schedule can be addressed by either theory. Either God knew in advance what people would do, so He told about what could not be changed, or God is such a good planner that He made it all happen despite the exercise of free will. If God were merely reciting what was already known to be the outcome, then revealing it would not influence people to either go along with it or work against it. But, if God does not know the future, but rather makes His plans work, telling people of the details of the plan engenders considerable risk. For example, telling people that you predict that they will turn left often results in them turning right out of spite.
- Romans 8:29 “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son.” As in Acts 2:23 above, what was foreknown was the plan, not the future. The same usage may be found in 1 Peter 1:2, 1:20, and Romans 11:2. These are the only places the word is used.
- Job 14:5 “Since his days are determined, the number of his months is with you; you have appointed his limits, so that he cannot pass.” This was Job’s opinion which God later said was wrong (Job 38 – 41).

However, there are numerous passages in the Old Testament in which God is given the attribute of changing His mind. Obviously, these are figures of speech, anthropomorphisms. However, the image conveyed must still be in keeping with the truth. For example, the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Torment and Paradise respectively cannot be literal, but must be basically true. Spirits neither have tongues nor need water. Nevertheless, we conclude basic truths about the disposition of spirits after physical death. In the same way, the following passages give us insight into the mind of God, but in human terms. For example, “seeing” the full character of God would have been too much for Moses (Exodus 33:17 – 34:7), so he was permitted to see only God’s “hind parts.” In the same way, in various passages, we are told that God changed His mind or relented or came to know. Although God may not think as we think, His communication would represent His thought processes in terms that we can comprehend, using our thought processes as illustrations.

- Genesis 2:19 The implication is that God was interested in hearing what Adam would name each animal. This interpretation was obvious to Muhammad because he wrote in the Koran a correction to the Genesis account, that God told Adam what to name each animal.
- Genesis 6:6 God was sorry that He had made man. This implies that the result, while still covered in the plan, was more evil than He had hoped. If God knew that this was going to be the result, He could not be accurately described as “repenting” of it.
- Genesis 22:12 God told Abraham, “Now I know that you fear God.” If God knew the future, He already knew.
- Exodus 32:9 – 14 God told Moses that He was going to destroy the Israelites (v9). Moses argued (v11 – 13). God changed His mind (v14). If God knew the future, God did not speak the truth in verse 9.
- Numbers 14:11 – 20 God told Moses He was going to destroy the Israelites (v12). Moses argued (v13 – 19). God pardoned them (v21). See previous.

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- Numbers 16:20 – 35 God told Moses He was going to destroy the Israelites (v21). Moses argued (v22). God changed the punishment (v24). See the previous two.
- Numbers 16:41 – 48 God told Moses He was going to destroy the Israelites (v45). Moses appealed (v46 – 48). God halted the plague (v21). See the previous three.
- Deuteronomy 9:13 – 29 The accounts in Exodus and Numbers are summarized with the same images. God changed His mind due to the arguments of Moses.
- Judges 10:13 – 16 God announced that He was forsaking Israel because they had not kept up their part of the contract. The people repented. God changed His mind. See the previous five.
- 2 Samuel 24:10 – 25 God did not carry out His announced sentence. If God knows the future, His threat of three days pestilence was a lie rather than relenting.
- Isaiah 5:2 – 5 In the parable, God portrays Himself as expecting a fruitful harvest, but it did not happen. If God knows the future, He could not have expectations that fail.
- Jeremiah 3:6 – 7 God portrays Himself as having expectations of Israel. If God knows the future, He could not have expectations that fail.
- Jeremiah 7:31, 29:11, and 32:35 God said that child sacrifice did not come into His mind, yet it happened and we can read about it.
- Jeremiah 29:11 God has plans for peace and hope, yet few find them.
- Daniel 10:12 – 14 The angel who was sent to influence Cyrus to sign the order to allow the Israelites to go back to Israel required three weeks and a backup archangel to get the job done. This implies that God sends angels to influence worldly events to come out the way He predicted.
- Jonah 3:4, 10 Assuming that Jonah was preaching the message that God intended, there was no promise of God relenting. Jonah announced that Nineveh would be overthrown in forty days. God relented. If God knows the future, either Jonah didn't get the message straight, or God lied to him.

Arguments in favor of God knowing the future become very complicated very quickly. The Scriptures cited in support of this position ignore contexts and overlook passages that contradict the presumption. The telling argument is that God has plans that do not come to pass (e.g., 1 Timothy 2:4 "...who desires all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.") and that He changes His mind. If the future is known, prayer is useless. If the future is known, God is deceiving us by telling us to choose.