

DOES GOD CHANGE HIS MIND?

**Students of Scripture have
sometimes disagreed on the subject
of God's immutability.**

Jeremiah 18:1-10 presents a compelling illustration of God as potter and Judah as clay. This image is a topic of various interpretations according to differing viewpoints on the nature of God. The potter metaphor is sometimes utilized as evidence for a transcendent, simple, immutable, and impassive God.

On the other hand, some, especially recently, have seen God as completely immanent, even to the extent of being the same as or one with the world. How does Jeremiah 18 relate to such a conception of God? Is God transcendent, imma-

nent, or something in between?

God's plan and condition for His people also has important implications. For instance, is God as the potter the sole determiner of history? Does the covenant relationship affect God? What about the mar in the clay (Jer. 18:4, KJV)?

Of great significance is the presentation of God as "relenting" (vss. 8, 10, NKJV). Does this threaten the immutability of God? Moreover,

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does it mean that God does not know the future? This passage illuminates the biblical perspective on these and related issues.

The way one views God and human history is of paramount importance to Christian theology. It is vital, therefore, to ascertain what this passage expresses about the relationship between God and the world in the metaphor of the potter and the clay and subsequent urging from God.

In the metaphor of the potter and the clay, the sovereignty and transcendence of God are clearly emphasized. God introduces this paradigm by instructing Jeremiah to observe the work of a potter shaping clay as a sign-act (vss. 2, 3). As Jeremiah observes the potter at his wheel, the clay becomes marred, and the potter then reacts and forms a different creation (vs. 4). There is no indication of the cause of the mar, a puzzle to which we shall return.

As a potter is superior and powerful over the inferior clay, so God is sovereign over Judah and free to shape what He wills. This nation, as God's chosen people, might not always remain the chosen. Just as the potter can cast away the clay, so God can reject the formerly elect nation. Further, just as the potter forms the clay, so God molded all creation. This imagery of the potter, in accordance with the rest of the Bible, points clearly to God's interaction

with and omnipotence over the whole universe.

Theologians sometimes present God as utterly immutable, transcendent, timeless, simple, and impassive. In other words, He is conceived as having no reciprocal relationship to the world, as absolutely immutable, and as incapable of being affected by the actions of human beings in history.

Millard J. Erickson acknowledges problems with the historical views of immutability because they "have actually drawn heavily on the Greek idea of immobility and sterility. This makes God inactive."¹ Bruce Ware has also seen difficulty with some classical definitions of immutability, saying that if by "divine immutability it is meant that God is distant, unfeeling, uncaring, static, and in every way unchanged and unaffected by the human condition, then it is highly doubtful that this conception of God is useful for one's religious experience."² Nevertheless, throughout the history of theology, there have been many who have held such a view. As we shall see, God as presented in Jeremiah 18 does not seem to fit such a conception.

God is not only the transcendent potter but also the immanent shaper of the clay. It is important to recognize that verse 5 and onward present the very words of YHWH Himself. God is personally communicating through Jeremiah to His people,

Judah. This denotes God as a personal being who is intimately involved with His creatures, a God who cares for His people.

Thus, God is not presented as disconnected or static. Rather, God is continually active in relationship to the world. Accordingly throughout the Old Testament, God is depicted as gracious, loving, longsuffering, merciful, and compassionate (Ex. 34:6, 7; Isa. 63:7-14; Jer. 31:3; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2).

The metaphor of potter also denotes immanence analogous to an earthly potter who shapes the clay intimately with his hands, carefully crafting a work of art. "If the clay did not achieve the desired shape, he did not throw it away. Instead, he patiently reworked it until it became the vessel he wanted it to be."³ One can picture the image of the potter leaning forward over the wheel of two stones, turning the wheel by foot and shaping the rotating clay into the desired work. In this way God is portrayed as a patient and longsuffering potter, working with His people in the context of an intimate relationship. The God of Jeremiah is thus intimately connected with the history of His creation, here specifically, the history of Judah.

Despite the biblical claim about God, His sovereignty and transcendence have been questioned and denied by some theological and philosophical systems. Pantheism, for

one, holds that everything is God.

A view that arose more recently that impacts contemporary theology is that of process theology, a kind of pantheism, which means literally "all in God." Process theology holds that reality is constantly in flux, as the name would suggest. For process theology, "to be real is to be in process."⁴ Though it is a helpful critique of the static God of the Greeks, process theology strays far from the Bible to the other extreme of an absolutely immanent God. In this model, not only is the world in process, but God Himself is also in process.

Moreover, as the world progresses, so does God. He and the world experience growth throughout eternity. This is problematic, as it denies the sovereignty and transcendence of the Creator God, specifically ruling out creation *ex nihilo*, among other things.

Erickson clarifies the problem: "Dependence on the processes of the world compromises quite seriously the absolute or unqualified dimensions of God."⁵ In this pantheistic view, the whole world is *in God*, though God is more than the world. Norman Gulley points out that process theology's focus on "God's consequent (immanent, or dependent on the world for bodily existence) nature" really denotes "one who is less than God."⁶ From a biblical standpoint, clearly in Jeremiah

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18, God cannot rightly be viewed as dependent upon the world. Rather, as the Creator, God is different from the world and transcends His own creation *while* being intimately active.

Jeremiah 18 depicts God as sovereign, transcendent, *and* immanent. Specifically important is the fact that there is a clear difference between God and the world in this passage. The potter is God, and the clay is His creation. Specifically, the clay refers to Judah in the analogy, yet the metaphor of God as potter refers on a broader level to God as Creator (Isa. 29:16; 64:8). Judah is a part of the world God has created and governs and seems to function as a microcosm of the God-world relationship. Implications regarding the God-Judah relationship are thus applicable regarding the wider God-world relationship.

God is not the clay, and the clay is not God. Neither is the clay in the potter. Moreover, the potter does not mold Himself as He molds the clay

but creates something outside of Himself. Although one cannot build a whole theology on this single passage, it clearly does not lend itself to the view of pantheism or pantheism. Rather, it points to the theistic God who is different from the world He created.

The message of God is that He is the potter and clearly has the power to form His will in the world. God is rightly considered sovereign and omnipotent with the full right to exercise His will. Isaiah 45:9 makes God's sovereignty clear: "Woe to him who strives with his Maker! Let the potsherd strive with the potsherd of the earth! Shall the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' Or shall your handiwork say, 'He has no hands?'" (Isa. 45:9, NKJV).

For Jeremiah, it is an absurd notion to suppose that the clay is greater than or equal to the potter. Despite the lucid account of God's power, however, God's omnipotence should not be considered exclusive

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to His relationship with humanity. Rather, God enters into relationship with His people and, simultaneously, remains the sovereign God. This dynamic between God and His people and the interrelationship of their actions is presented especially in Jeremiah 18:7-10.

The Divine and Human Will

Thus far, the metaphor is clear that Judah is like clay in the forming hand of God. The power of God is compared to the inconsequential power of the nation of Judah. God is sovereign and has the complete right to deal with the world as He sees fit. Nevertheless, God goes out of His way to save this people and to forgive them, even though they are clearly stiff-necked. In the midst of the overpowering sovereignty of God, grace shines throughout in the patience and forbearance of God and a call to repentance, as we shall see in Jeremiah 18:7-10. *The Bible Reader's Companion* says, "The message God intended to communicate

through this illustration from ancient life was not, as some have thought, one of divine sovereignty. It was a message of grace. Judah had resisted the divine potter. Yet even now God was willing to begin anew and reshape His people into that good vessel He had had in mind from the beginning."

This call to repentance illuminates the interaction of God's will with that of His people in Jeremiah 18:7-10. Based on the sinfulness of Judah, God declares His plan to "pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it" (vs. 7, NKJV). The verb *nātās*, meaning to root out or pluck, is judgment language, used frequently with reference to the Lord's work of destroying evil nations: of Israel (Deut. 29:28; 2 Chron. 7:20) and of her neighbors (Jer. 12:14, 15, 17). Specifically of interest is the relationship to the covenant blessings and curses in Deuteronomy 29. This passage places the warning of God's sovereign judgment in the context of the covenant relationship.

Some theologians have held that this sovereignty of God negates human freedom. John Calvin held that God as potter represents the hidden purpose of God that determines all events in history. Referring to the possibility that this passage promotes free will, Calvin claimed that these verses are merely accommodating language, whereas in reality God has already unalterably decreed both human actions and His own. Does the text itself, however, imply a determinism that negates free will, or does it allow for the conditionality in the nature of history? Notice the sequence of condition and response in God's own words to Judah.

Jeremiah 18, verses 7 to 10 form block parallelism consisting of a correlation between verses 7 and 9 and verses 8 and 10, respectively. Notice the parallels between verses 7 and 9: "*At one moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it,*" (vs. 7, NRSV, italics supplied). "*And at another moment I may declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it*" (vs. 9, NRSV, italics supplied).

Verse 9 contrasts with verse 7 in that God speaks in an instant for construction and proposes to "build and plant." This language emphasizes the power and authority of God as the agent of both judgment and salvation. Notice that to "pluck

up" is the opposite of to "plant" and to "pull down" and to "destroy" is the opposite of to "build." Both verses 7 and 9 refer to God's intentions regarding two opposite situations; those of a disobedient and obedient nation, respectively. However, God announces along with this plan a condition and the possibility of change. Verses 8 and 10 are also parallel: "If that nation I warned repents of its evil, then *I will relent* and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned" (vs. 8, NIV, italics supplied). "If it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then *I will relent* concerning the good with which I said I would benefit it" (vs. 10, NKJV, italics supplied).

Notice that in verse 8 the conditional clause is the nation's turn from its evil; whereas in verse 10 the nation continues in evil. In both cases, God will "relent" accordingly. In the main clause of verse 8, God will "relent" from the evil; in verse 10, from the good. Both correspond directly to the decision of the nation.

In this parallelism God describes His covenant relationship with His people. The condition is explicit. If the people will turn and repent, God will respect their choice and change His plan. Likewise, if they pursue evil, He will respond accordingly. Thus, the passage makes clear that "a full and effective human response to the divine will can open up a wholly changed prospect for the future."⁸

God's sovereignty is here asserted in a "dynamic way, identifying an aspect of that sovereignty that is sometimes missed or ignored: the possibility of not simply destroying the people but remolding them."⁹ The call of God serves as a divine warning and a real opportunity for the people to turn and be spared the consequences of rebellion. Thus, the potter-clay metaphor includes a degree of freedom in human action.

Accordingly, Jeremiah 18 asserts that "God's mind can change in regard to dealing out catastrophe or good, depending on the way a nation acts."¹⁰

A concrete biblical example of this conditional nature of God's actions is the narrative of Jonah. In Jonah 3:4, the prophet declares that Nineveh will be destroyed in 40 days. Yet the people of Nineveh repent and are spared (vss. 9, 10). Thus, we can see that in the Bible there is no theological conundrum regarding God's actions relating directly to the actions of human agents. God's relationship with humans transcends any metaphysical straightjacket of utter immutability.

The consistency in the parallel between the nation that turns from evil and the nation that turns toward it relates to the character of humankind. The character of God, however, is unchanging in the parallel texts. The key is, if a nation does evil, then God will "relent" of His purpose for good. If

that nation does good, God will "relent" of a purpose for evil. The focal point in the parallelism is the difference in the respective choices of the nation. This is illustrating God's righteous government and the importance of the choice of the free agent, in this case, the nation. God proclaims in this call that He allows His creatures to choose the outcome rather than to use His omnipotence to dictate all the events of history. His sovereignty is not diminished as His gracious and longsuffering call is exemplified.

The complexity of the potter-clay relationship, as depicted in Jeremiah 18:7-10, provides the context to address the riddle of the mar in the clay in verse 4. At first glance there is no indication of what caused the mar. As in the metaphor, there is also a mar in the post-Fall world. Evil is pervasive alongside the goodness in God's creation. For some, any mar in the clay questions either God's goodness or His omnipotence. How can one reconcile God's goodness in a world full of evil? Is God, as potter, the proponent of all the evil in the history of the world? The explicit call to human action in the passage helps engage these questions.

The nation has done evil in God's sight, in the passage: "it does not obey [God's] voice" (vs. 10, NKJV). Evil is here defined as what is opposed to God. In this way the passage implies that God is good and

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what is against Him is evil. This is a direct answer to the question of God's goodness and the problem of evil. There is no evil in God; He is pure goodness (Ps. 25:8; Nahum 1:7; Jer. 33:9; Rom. 2:4). God is not the proponent of evil, but a merciful and longsuffering God, calling His people so that He can save them (1 Tim. 2:4; 2 Peter 3:9).

It is interesting to recognize that "In [Jer.] 18:4 the passive verb 'was spoiled' and the words 'another vessel' point to the responsiveness of the potter."¹¹ In other words, the potter responds to a mar in the clay and re-makes the vessel. This is not represented as the mistake of the potter. The people are marred because they do not follow after God in the covenant relationship. This is briefly presented in 19:4, 5, which expresses the infidelity and idolatry of Judah that extended even to child sacrifice (see also Rom. 1:18-32).

Nevertheless, there is hope for Judah. Even with the marring of the clay, "the potter is powerful enough to devise a circumstantial plan 'as it seemed good to him' (18:4)."¹²

The Relenting of God

According to the decision of the nation, Jeremiah 18:8 and 10 depict God with the ability to relent from His purpose of disaster. Interestingly, the word for disaster here is from the same root as the word for evil in the same verse. In effect, God relents from doing the evil to them because they turn, or repent, from their evil.

The idea of God relenting troubles many a theologian and is important to analyze. The word translated "relent" has a range of meaning including comfort, sorrow and grief, and regret or repentance. Here it signifies a conditional relenting by God.

God never changes in His goodness, and His promises are sure. For the Christian, this brings great confidence in salvation through Jesus Christ. Erickson views immutability as “constancy.” This, in accordance with the Bible, means that God is “active and dynamic, but in a way that is stable and consistent with his nature.” God is, then, “dependable.”

This raises two important and quite different issues. The first relates to God’s immutability. Does God really relent? Does He change His mind? Is the relenting of God a proof that He changes, that He is not immutable? Second, based on this passage, questions have been raised about the foreknowledge of God. Does He receive new information? Does He not know the future? These questions must be considered.

Is the relenting of God merely an anthropomorphism, as has often been asserted throughout the history of theology? The primary biblical passages that assert that God does not change include Numbers 23:19, 1 Samuel 15:29, and Malachi 3:6. These passages depict an unchanging God.

But what does this changelessness of God entail? As we have seen, Jeremiah 18 presents a God who is active in relationship with His people, engaging them with His own words to repent. We have also seen, however, that some hold that God is utterly

immutable in such a manner as to be incapable of relationship. It is claimed by some that “the classic understanding is that God speaks about himself anthropomorphically or analogically all the way through Scripture—not just in a few places. In every noun, verb, and adjective God has used to present Himself, certain notions of limitation and moral inadequacy apply to the human world that must be deleted when we apply it to God.”¹³

Just how are we to relate, then, to God’s self-revelation in Jeremiah 18 and throughout Scripture? It is affirmed that God descends to speak at a human level and that He cannot be fully understood by the human mind. Nevertheless, it also seems apparent that God depicts Himself as accurately as is possible. Thus, the universal anthropomorphic nature of Scripture should not and cannot dismiss the direct statements of God about Himself.

In Jeremiah 18 it is clear that God responds to the actions of the nation

of Judah. Thus, the passage contends that the actions of humans affect the actions of God. Fretheim speaks of the repentance of God as a “controlling metaphor” based on the attributes of love and mercy that were foundational to Hebrew thought (Ex. 34:6, 7; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2). He states, “God is revealed not as someone who is unbending or unyielding, as a focus on immutability suggests.”¹⁴ Rather, God is presented as the sovereign and transcendent potter *and* as immanent and *affected* God, active within His creation.

Affected in this context means that God interacts and relates to human choice and the world, not that God changes in His being or becomes something more or something else. Based on this passage, as well as others, God has real relationship with the world. It is thus permissible to speak of a pathos of God that also includes the love of God which is fundamental to the Christian understanding of salvation history. It seems that rejection of any pathos of God negates the relationship of God to humanity, the very relationship that Jesus Christ died to reconcile. Thus God is the sovereign potter; He is not impassive.

Does this mean God is not immutable, that He is not constant? Certainly not! The changelessness of God need not entail the Greek conception of simplicity and immutability. Rather, the God of the Bible

is living, dynamic, *and* changeless. He is dynamic as an active agent in the history of the world. His changelessness does not refer to stasis. Rather, it refers to the unchanging constancy of God’s character, as dialectically expressed in this passage.

Most importantly, God never changes in His goodness, and His promises are sure. For the Christian, this brings great confidence in salvation through Jesus Christ. Erickson views immutability as “constancy.” This, in accordance with the Bible, means that God is “active and dynamic, but in a way that is stable and consistent with his nature.” God is, then, “dependable.”¹⁵ Thus, God can relent in this way with no negative implications regarding His constancy.

The second problem of God’s “relenting” relates to the foreknowledge of God. Some say that God actually changes His mind, meaning He receives totally new information because of the choice of a free agent. In other words, it is asserted that because God is said to “repent,” He must not have known the outcome of a free agent’s choice. The question is asked, Would God state His action as conditional even though He has foreknowledge?

In answer to this question, it seems there is an important distinction between God determining to do something and planning to do something. A plan may be condi-

tional and responsive to the free choices of individuals. Therefore, God could know what nation will or will not repent, but still give them the opportunity to do so in actual history. “The point is that a prophecy of doom is not absolute. Prophetic warnings of judgment are actually designed to elicit repentance.”¹⁶

Abraham Heschel says on this, “Events are not like rocks on the shore shaped by wind and water. Choice, design, is what determines the shape of events.”¹⁷ God offers the call to repentance because He is gracious, and He really wants to spare His creation from condemnation.

Why does God give a call for repentance when He already knows the outcome? It seems that He acts this way throughout the Bible for congruity and fairness. How else would humans have a real opportunity to repent? It is unlikely that a kingdom would turn from its evil ways without a warning from God. Therefore, God is surpassingly good to reach out to nations and kingdoms. An unmerciful God would not even bother. The story of Nineveh, in which God also is said to “relent” (Jonah 3:4, 9, 10; 4:2), is highly enlightening to this problem.

Another verse that involves the “repentance” or “relenting” of God is Genesis 6:6. This verse sheds light on Jeremiah 18: “The Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth,

and He was grieved in His heart” (Gen. 6:6, NKJV). Here, the word for “sorry” (from the same Hebrew root as “relent” in Jeremiah 18) is better understood in the context of God’s sorrow, or grief. This need not imply that God is caught by surprise. Rather, though He foreknew the evil on the Earth before the Flood, He nevertheless grieved over the horrible and atrocious condition of His creation.

There are also many examples of God “relenting” of a good purpose, for instance, taking Israel back into the wilderness when He had brought them within sight of Canaan. Here and in Jeremiah 18, God’s changeless character is not called into question, nor does this posit a change or growth in God’s character, but rather action in relation to human free choices.

An implicit testimony in Jeremiah 18:8 that God is not receiving new information and not changing in His character might be found in the difference in the words used to describe when a nation “turns from its evil” and God’s “relenting.” “Turns from its evil” means to physically turn or change course and here connotes the meaning of repentance. It thus signifies a change in direction, a change of heart. We would expect the word for God’s relenting, if meant to be the same as human repentance, to be the same word. The difference in word usage

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may imply the difference of meaning. This is not to suggest that one word denotes human repentance and the other divine repentance semantically. Rather, there is semantic overlap in other passages. The point being made here regards the selection of different words and the potential contrast implied thereby. Seemingly, the words are chosen to illumine the vast difference between the repenting and change of a human and the relenting and grace of God.

Interestingly, *Young’s Literal Translation* translates this word to relent as “have relented,” in the past tense (Jer. 18:8, 10). Is this translation warranted? It seems that the form here should be interpreted to mean “completeness and factuality” of a future event. God’s promise is as good as completed. Accordingly, God is not receiving new information; His foreknowledge is affirmed.

Therefore, this passage should not be understood as a new thought

on God’s part to preserve Judah; rather, this is part of His plan to give Judah a chance to repent as He did for Jonah. Naturally, the consequences of not heeding God’s command would come. However, here God is telling the people that He will forgive them if only they will repent. This is akin to the plan of salvation put into effect after the fall of humanity. That plan was “from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8, KJV), yet clearly in response to a future problem of sinful humanity.

God’s relenting is not a weakness, but part of His merciful character. It is a promise that, “If you repent, I will reciprocate.” This is not a change in the essence of God, but in accordance with God’s essence as just, merciful, and loving.

Henry C. Thiessen comments, “God’s immutability is not like that of the stone that does not respond to changes about it, but like that of the column of mercury which rises and falls according as the temperature

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changes. His immutability consists in His always doing the right and in adapting the treatment of His creatures to the variations in their character and conduct.”¹⁸ Therefore, Jeremiah 18:7-10 is all about the constancy of God, not His change. The fact is, if a nation will repent, God will relent from punishing them. Nevertheless, He is not necessarily receiving new information about the nation, but He is willing to act in accordance with their historical decisions.

A sound theology of the doctrine of God can never be based on the implications of any one passage without proper consideration of the total biblical picture. This passage alone does not substitute for a fully developed doctrine of God, nor is it assumed that the deep and complicated debates over the nature of God are to be settled in this example. Nevertheless, Jeremiah 18 expresses

important information about the nature and character of God and His relationship with the world.

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Jeremiah 18 affirms that God is both sovereign and not impassive. He is not the god of pantheism or panentheism, nor is He the absolutely simple and impassible god

of classical Greek philosophy. He is the unchanging “I AM” (Ex. 3:14, KJV), capable of dynamic interaction with the world. It must be understood that God as an engaged potter does *not* mean that God changes in His being or that He is in any way progressing toward a different state. He was, is, and always will be the same God, perfect and almighty and unchanging.

Nevertheless, God’s real relationship with the world allows humanity power to choose their course. His action may change accordingly.

The sign-act of God as potter precludes the implication that He lacks power. Rather, He freely chooses to allow a measure of freedom. This metaphor thus points toward a view of God as the biblical God of sovereignty, love and justice, held in union, not in exclusivity, one God of intimate relationship *and* transcendent omnipotence. □

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