

A post-AAR presentation (11/20/06) response will follow this paper. Please read the Scriptures at the appropriate places

Open and Relational Theologies Group:
What God Does, Might, or Cannot Know about the Future

The Hope of God vs the Knowledge of God

Abstract

Gen 22, Exod 32-34, 1 Samuel 15.10-34, 1 Kings 21.20-29, and Jeremiah 18.1-12 and 26.1-6, 12-13, passages from two of the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible represent a world view that assumes God does not know the future exhaustively, but rather hopes for certain outcomes. These Scriptures show that God altered the election, blessing, or judgment that God had planned, or they announce that God will “change God’s mind” in response to human action. Thus, in the cases God’s plans depend on human response, they must be classified as God’s hopes. This in no way implies that God does not plan certain outcomes—and carry out them out, regardless of the actions of particular humans, because God is free to use *other* people if such plans require human cooperation. God’s freedom is never restricted—even by God’s self. Although God is characterized revealing the future in certain cases, these passages must be understood together with the many Scriptures that represent the hope of God in the people of God rather than God’s foreknowledge of the future as actual.

Paper

The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the plain sense of passages that are representative of most of Scripture. I do not advocate a simplistic interpretive approach that does not allow for understanding literary and historical contexts, cultural particulars, and authorial agendas. But we should be clear about what the Scripture is saying, and use a wide range of Scriptures to develop our theology. Although our view of God must be

informed by reason and philosophy, tradition, and experience, Scripture centered communities of faith cannot ignore the evidence that the biblical writers depict God discovering, learning, and responding to human choices and other circumstances as history unfolds. The future for which God hopes depends on the obedience of people with free will.

Most open and relational theologians agree that God knows everything that is possible to be known, including the past, the present, and all future contingencies. Knowing the past and the present means God has an edge on knowing which, among all future contingencies, would be *most likely* to occur in the future. I agree with the open theologians that posit this would bring God's knowledge, at least of the near future, close to certain. However, because the future has not happened yet, God knowing it, even should we agree that God stands outside of time, is logically impossible. Thus, God remains free to influence and affect the present in the present and to act creatively, interdependently, and cooperatively at all times. God is also free to act independently, as shown in the creation stories, but Scripture, for the most part, narrates God acting in history with humans. It is difficult to discuss acts of God that have no relation to humans.

Of course not every one who attempts to place Scripture at the center of her/his practice and theology agrees with this view or how to interpret the passages that support it. The view that God knows the future as actual imagines a "blueprint" that God made when God was free, a blueprint that requires the future to unfold only in the way that God planned and knows. When this blueprint for all of life was finished, God was no longer free. It continues to bind God, as well as humans, to this blueprint. Thus, the predetermined blueprint is greater than a living God, in that history must unfold according to this pattern and not according to what God decides to do in the present.

Although proponents of God's exhaustive knowledge of the future claim to be affirming the sovereignty of God, the open and relational view appreciates God's sovereignty to a greater extent, because, within it, God's resources and resourcefulness, God's wisdom, love and power remain forever in demand—on call. Although God's character of love

and God's good intentions towards humans are constant, God remains free to creatively implement new solutions, responding wisely to the particular circumstances of the present required by human freedom. The relational view values God's vitality and continuous loving-kindness. This is God's glory. Such qualities are required of a divinity that works with humans, on their behalf, to establish God's reign and will on earth.

And this view is scriptural. Gen 22, Exod 32-34, 1 Samuel 15.10-34, 1 Kings 21.20-29, and Jeremiah 18.1-12 and 26.1-6, 12-13 are sample passages from the Torah, the Former and the Latter Prophets, two of the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible. These are characteristic of the predominant scriptural assumption that God and humans are both responsive beings and that the future is not predetermined, knowable, or fixed. In fact, most of the narratives of the Hebrew Bible—from beginning to end—would not make sense if God knew what would the other characters were going to do before they did it. In spite of the range of times and settings for the production of the books in the Jewish Scriptures/Christian Old Testament, this perspective persists. Biblical passages that extol God for accomplishing plans made long ago confirm this rather than deny it—God is free to make plans and accomplish them at any point—or to revise them if necessary.

Certainly, according to Scripture, God has grand creative and salvific schemes to accomplish and is persistent in taking the initiative to bring them to pass. In biblical narratives, nonetheless, God's intentions are regularly altered or delayed because of human activity. God started with plan A, moved to plan B and sometimes back to A or on to C, depending on human response: usually intercession and/or repentance, as we shall see in Exod 32-33. Nonetheless human response, be it intercession or repentance, does not *force* God to change plans, as we shall see in our example from 1 Sam 15; God is always free to be moved—or not be moved. God's loving purposes come to pass, even if the players and particulars change, because God never abandons the mission of redemption of people in God's image, reconciliation, and peacemaking. God is always reliable.

Gen 22 demonstrates that only after Abraham, by his actions, showed God that he was willing to obey God's order to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice, did God *know* that Abraham feared God. As a result, Abraham was promised blessings that appear, canonically speaking, as a confirmation of earlier promises. At the outset of the narrative the narrator informs us that this is a test of Abraham. At the end of the narrative it becomes clear that it was a test of Abraham so that *God* would **see** what Abraham would do in response. When Abraham obeyed by going so far as to bind Isaac, lay him on the wood, and take the knife to slay him, the LORD stopped him by saying: "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for *now I know* that you fear God, **seeing** you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me (22.12). Abraham names the place *Yahweh yireh*; the LORD will **see** (22.14).

Commentators have gone through contortions to harmonize this passage with the view that God knew what Abraham would do. This, they say, was a test *for* Abraham, to build his character, not *of* Abraham for God to observe and thus discover what he would do. But this is NOT what the text says. The angel of the LORD, in verse 12, says, "Now I know, implied, because I have seen. Abraham names the place: the LORD will see!

The narrative's representation of God learning about Abraham through this incident should not be dismissed. God tried Abraham; God saw Abraham's response and reiterated the blessings intended for Abraham and his seed. I believe that this story was transmitted to challenge Israel to be thoroughly obedient, given their founder was willing, though not required, to sacrifice his beloved son. It is a story about the faith of Abraham, the oneness of Abraham with God and of Isaac with Abraham. If God had already known the depth of Abraham's faith, if God had known what Abraham would do should God ask him to sacrifice his son, then God would not have needed to test him, waiting and watching him until he took the knife to slay his son. The plain sense of this passage is God only knew Abraham by means of the agony of Abraham: his choice to obey God over saving the life of his son; a great reversal of the choices expressed in the Garden story of Gen 2-3. I grant that Gen 22 is a difficult passage for building theology. Again, this is primarily about Abraham and the depth of his faith, as shown through his actions,

and his willingness to demonstrate that if one can trust God in such a bizarre request, how much more the people of God should obey God's commands that are for their own peace and welfare.

Exod 32-33, the first text we will examine, depicts God's disappointment in and violent reaction to the Israelites' decision to break their recently established covenant by building and honoring a golden calf as their deliverer from Egypt. This narrative also demands that we recall the Gen 2-3 Garden story, where woman and man were placed within a beautiful fertile Garden to live and eat, with access to the tree of life. But they disobeyed God's command to avoid the fruit from another tree in the midst of the Garden. Did God have this entire scenario in the blueprint? If so, were they free to do otherwise—were they free to obey? Should they then be held responsible for sinning? Compatibilists would say yes, God can know the future without controlling it, and that the first man and woman were responsible because, even though God knew what they would do, they had the free will to choose otherwise. But this must be thought about very carefully. Did God know before they ate that they would eat and that God would not execute them on that day, even though this is what God had threatened? Was this an empty threat? But if God knew what they were going to do, how would any sort of threat work one way or another? Even threats imply hope. Does it not make much more sense to take the story at face value? God hoped they would obey and was extremely disappointed when they did not. God, after their choice, decided not to execute them on that day, although that was the stated consequence, because God is merciful. Instead, he exiled them from the tree of life, but clothed them, given their newfound sense of shame, another example of God's mercy.

Assuming that God knew about the breakfast in the Garden before the woman and the man ate leads to a quagmire of theological problems that are not necessary. God discovered what they did as they did it and decided then how to respond. Covenant, broken covenant, mercy with punishment is a consistent theme throughout the Scriptures. Does God not hope people will keep the covenant? Are we not free to do so? Of course. When we do not, God picks up the pieces and moves forward, still hoping and offering

opportunities to people for obedience and blessing. Sometimes God chooses to use other people; sometimes he uses the chastened ones. The Garden story says that when humans think it is to our advantage, we tend to use our free will to sin, but no one is forced to do so; we are free to be obedient.

In the narrative preceding Exod 32, the people had explicitly agreed to keep the commands—they performed a ritual that bound them to this covenant and to God (Exod 24). Then they, like man and woman of Gen 3, broke the covenant. Although God punished the Israelites, God did not destroy them. Gen 3 and Exod 33-34 express a similar formula: grace and covenant, broken covenant, mercy and judgment.

In Exod 32.10, God's first reaction to the flagrant covenant breaking was to move to plan B, total annihilation of all of the adulterous, calf worshipping Israelites and make a new nation out of Moses alone. This plan is thwarted by Moses' plea for God to repent—to change God's mind—about the harm God planned to do to Israel. Moses reasoned this way: "First you went to all this effort to bring them out of Egypt, so why should the Egyptians say that you had the evil intent to slay them? Remember your covenant with the fathers to whom you swore you would multiply their descendents! Think of your reputation with the Egyptians, and think of your promise to the fathers—is this what you want?"

Apparently not, because this reasoning worked and God changed God's mind about the disaster he planned to do to God's people. This is exactly what the text says. By taking this narrative seriously, we discover that neither God's first choice, plan A—an obedient Israel, nor God's second choice, plan B—a destroyed Israel, happened. Rather the "future" held plan C, produced as a result of Moses' *and* God's freedom to respond. Plan C was far more like plan A than it was plan B—God did not destroy all the people and make a great nation out of Moses. However, many of the people died and God planned to send an angel before them in God's place; neither was God's original intention or hope. Eventually, however, God responded to Moses' plea to go with the people

Again, advocates of God's foreknowledge suggest that God knew that the Israelites would sin, that Moses would intercede, and that God would respond to Moses' prayer and save the nation, all the while knowing how it would unfold. They say the story encourages us to pray like Moses did. But what is encouraging here? Why should we be heartened to pray if God knows we are either going to do so? Encouragement prompts us to do something we were not otherwise going to do. How does prayer make a difference if God's plans must go according to the foreknown program? And why does the text show God getting so angry? So distressed? So surprised, when he *sees* the people clamoring about the calf, giving Aaron's sculpture credit for what God did? Is this not evidence of disappointment? Do not surprise and disappointment negate foreknowledge? How can we take the text seriously if we do not acknowledge the freedom of people to live within God's will or not and God's freedom to respond to their choices? How can humans and God be free if their stories are foreknown? Although the trek out of Egypt, into the wilderness, and to the Promised Land did not go as God had hoped, God never abandoned Israel or the macro-plan of delivering them from slavery and giving them freedom, land, and peace. God did not give up hope.

Moving from the Torah to the Former Prophets, we turn to **1 Samuel 15**, the story about God rejecting Saul, whom God had chosen to be the first king of Israel. Verse 29 is often used to prove that God does not change God's mind. But this passage actually demonstrates God's freedom, first to change God's mind concerning Saul, then to remain firm in God's decision not to establish Saul's house as a lasting dynasty, in spite of Saul's pleading. God was disappointed in Saul because in the early stages of military-hero type reign he made poor choices. He was judged disobedient to previously revealed commands of God through Samuel. According to 1 Samuel, God **hoped** Saul would be a good king—he was humble, stately, and from the weakened tribe of Benjamin, and thus a more neutral tribe than a king from either Ephraim or Judah.

For his failures to obey the voice of the LORD, as told in 1 Sam 13, 14, and 15, Samuel told Saul: "Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king" (15.23). Not: "I selected you with the plan to reject you and establish

David in your place.” Rather, “**Because you have** rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.” Saul pled with Samuel to pardon his sin and return with him, but Samuel said, “You have rejected the word of the LORD, and the LORD has rejected you from being king over Israel (15.26). . . And also, the Glory of Israel will not lie or change his mind for he is not a man, that he should change his mind” (15.29).

This story affirms God’s freedom to both change *and* remain firm—to not alter a particular decision. Although God removed the potential of a Saulide dynasty in Israel, on account of Saul’s own actions, God would not change God’s mind about rejecting Saul, even when Saul “repented” of his sin. We have seen that God agreed to change God’s mind in response to Moses’ prayer, but here God refused to recall God’s recall of Saul’s dynasty. God was free and not bound to God’s choice of Saul or Saul’s request for reprieve. Prayer is not coercive; it depends on what God wishes to do.

1 Kings 21 is another Former Prophet text about a king who failed to lead according to the words of the LORD. After his wife Jezebel had Naboth murdered over his vineyard, Elijah prophesied by the word of the LORD against Ahab and his house to Ahab’s face. “I will cut off every male from Ahab, bond or free in Israel because you have made Israel to sin” (See 21.21-26). Strictly speaking, this is a pronouncement. It is similar to that of Jonah to the Ninevites of what was certain to happen. Within its literal framework, it provides no call or possibility for repentance: “Forty days more and Nineveh will be destroyed!” Nonetheless, as in the case of Nineveh, when Ahab heard the dire consequences of his evil behavior that God was determined to implement, Ahab repented. “When Ahab heard these words, he rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his flesh, and fasted and lay in sackcloth, and went about dejectedly.”

As a result, even though the threat was not constructed as conditional, when God saw Ahab’s reaction of repentance, God postponed the havoc he planned to wreck on Ahab. God tells Elijah, “Have you *seen* how Ahab has humbled himself before me?” Again, God *sees* what people do; then God freely responds. This does not show predetermination of outcomes or God’s foreknowledge of them. Thus, even when the pronouncement of

the prophet does not explicitly say, or, “unless you repent, your family will be wiped out,” or, in the case of Nineveh, “Repent or in thirty days Nineveh will be destroyed!” when the announcement produced repentance, God relented of the judgment. If we did not know prophecy was to save people before this story, we know it *because* of the story.

We learn through this and many other passages that the nature of prophecy is not usually to predict what will happen, but to prevent dire consequences through the audience’s change of behavior in response to the prophecy.

This could not be clearer as we move to the Latter Prophets. Our representative passages **Jeremiah** 18.1-12 and 26.1-6, 12-13 are very explicit that the purpose of prophecy is to tell what would happen only if the prophets’ advice is not heeded. Using the potter as an illustration in an oracle to Jeremiah, God directly affirms that what God will bring about in the future depends on the obedience or disobedience of the nation in question, regardless of the original plans God had intended for them. Read Jer 18.1-12.

At one moment *in time*, God declares good intentions for a people, but, as time passes, if the people prove to be unworthy of God’s gracious intentions—if the clay spoils itself, God will change God’s mind and bring about disaster. Likewise, at a moment *in time*, God declares an intention to harm a people, but if they repent and do well, God will change God’s mind and do well for them instead. Immediately bringing it close to home, God declares the intention to bring disaster on Judah, but begs the people to turn in response to this warning so that this disaster may be averted. This passage is not unique. God is pictured as participating in time with humans and moving, in time, from one plan to the other in reaction to the people’s response to prophetic warnings. The people are free and God is free; God hopes for the best—repentance and blessing, but God does not know what the people will do with this latest warning, he will wait and **see**.

Jer 26.1-6, 12-13 is similar. Read.

These passages make explicit the assumption underlying many other texts: that God hopes for God’s people to freely choose to obey and is disappointed if they do not.

Biblical narratives depicting God's hope and disappointment take for granted that God *does not* know the future, without treating the more philosophical problem of whether God *can* know the future. Philosophically speaking, God's knowledge of the present, the past, and all contingencies make God's understanding of the potential future far greater than we can imagine, and may very well explain how God reveals certain aspects of the future to some prophets (Deut 13, 1 Sam 9, 1 Kings 22). And, as I've said before, God announces micro and macro plans that God intends to carry out, one way or another. The Scriptures themselves do not struggle with this tension—it is left to us. Even God's beliefs about God's own actions—God's intentions—may change in response to human actions, including prayer.

Time fails me to tell of story after story in the Scriptures along this line. I mentioned the Genesis Garden story earlier. Students say after reading the Gen 2-4 Garden story, or the flood story of Gen 6-9, "why did God create humans when he knew they were going to disobey and sin?" This is actually a good question. Why indeed? Some answer: "God knew, but decided humans with free will were worth it anyway, so took a chance." But *taking a chance* means that God did not know—God took a chance—God *hoped* they would obey. When they did not choose to keep God's command, God sent them into exile, but developed further ways of relating to them outside of the Garden. God did not abandon the human family. Seeing Cain's anger and fallen face, suspecting Cain may choose to submit to sin's desire for him, God warned him. In fact, God informed him that he had the freedom to overcome—to rule—sin. God continued as a player in the unpredictable human context, confronting and exiling Cain after he failed to heed God's warning. Story after story shows the reader that even exile does not separate people from God. Humanity, creation, life, the zillion variables involved; it's all messy; it's risk-ridden and unpredictable, even for God.

I have not brought the New Testament into this particular paper, which, I realize has several passages, such as Ephesians 1, which use terms such as "predestined" and "foreknew" regarding God's move to draw Gentiles into the People of God through the faithfulness of Christ and the mission of Paul. This does not address the issue of

individual choice and destiny, but rather God's freedom to plan and act on behalf of Gentiles. It is also important to acknowledge other Scriptures that point to God's determination to elect certain individuals for particular missions. God was determined to use Moses and Jeremiah that for lengthy and thankless professions. Nonetheless, their later, continuous cooperation was necessary, but did this not involve their cooperation? Certainly, in Exodus, the LORD (YHWH, God's personal name) is portrayed as both using and controlling Pharaoh's hard heart to create a people of God from slaves. This was part of God's plan to topple the old god, the divine Pharaoh, by making him a pawn while God saved the Israelites with great fanfare. These are further examples of God's freedom to plan and act that do not suggest God exhaustively knows the future as if it had actually already happened.

The overwhelming balance of Scripture narratives—and genre is a crucial issue here—portrays God as a player in the drama—intentional, powerful and passionate, who depends on people with free will for God's hopes to be fulfilled. These texts have demonstrated that, as determined as God was to produce outcome X under contingency A, God did not know X would occur, because the future was open to other contingencies, dependent upon human choice. Even though, in some cases, God had announced a future outcome (X) under contingency A, God did not know that future would unfold because it depended on the as yet unknown human response to God's command or prophetic warning. We find further divine freedom exhibited in the passages in which God altered the judgment that he had planned for humans. Clearly, in prophetic textual contexts, the function of prophets and prophecy is to reveal potential—not assured—future outcomes. God's pronouncement of a particular future outcome is not assured; prophecy demonstrates the hope of God in the people of God.

Conclusion

On a literary level, it would be unusual and awkward to have a story in which one character, who was involved in the plot, knew how it would unfold in advance. It will not do to have one of the players knowing what the others will do and yet operating as if he/she did not. A narrator could have this role, but if one of the players possessed knowledge of the entire storyline, and yet was drawn to act as if he/she did not, the story

would have no integrity. In regards to biblical narratives, if we presume God knew how the micro and macro narratives would unfold, we would have to ask, why write the story at all? Simply say: and God knew thus and so, and it was so and that is the end of it. A very short story.

Proponents of God's exhaustive foreknowledge could say: in order to write any story for historical or teaching purposes in which God is a character, one must write *as if* God is like all the other characters, ignorant of the future. The *as if* is a stylistic ruse, whereby biblical stories accommodate to human understanding and teach something else, not that God is a real player who relates *dynamically* to the others, not that God learns, discovers, reacts, and is free from a predetermined future. In fact, they claim that this is an anthropomorphism and that God is more dissimilar than like the depictions of God learning and responding as the story unfolds.¹

Proponents of God's freedom and hope say there is no *as if*. Although God is greater than language, story, and metaphor, Scripture is a guide to our understanding of God. God *does* act and react dynamically as history unfolds. Otherwise, not only the stories, but also the efficacy of prayer and the existence of evil would make no sense. Why *must* God know the future as if it had happened? Are not God's life, love, and freedom enough? Can we not rest in God's loving, redemptive intentions for all creation and in Paul's affirmation: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also with him freely give us all things?" (Romans 8.32).

Certainly there is merit to the affirmation that God is beyond Scripture and beyond human reasoning and what is logical to us. Language, story, and metaphor are wonderful, albeit limited, media by which we understand God. But God is not *contrary* to these means of communication or to logic; they reflect and represent truths about God, even if they are fraught with the limitations of the humans who wrote, receive, and think and talk about them.

¹ Steven C Roy, *How Much Does God Foreknow? A Comprehensive Biblical Study* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2006), 159-191.

As you may be thinking, much of this debate revolves around how one defines the future. For advocates of God's foreknowledge, "omniscient" is defined to *include* knowing the future rather than knowing everything that is possible to be known. Foreknowledge advocates see the future as knowable, because somehow, to God, the future has happened. God is defined as able to look at or back at the future because all times are simultaneous to God. But, as Swinburne says, and I paraphrase: If God exists in all moments at once, then all moments happen at once. This is nonsense. Yesterday would be the same day as today and tomorrow. If God had fixed intentions from all eternity, God would be a very lifeless thing; not a person who reacts to humans with sympathy or anger, pardon or chastening. A free person is not immutable, unable to change.²

As an explanation for how God can know the future without controlling it, many people say, with Boethius, that because God is above and outside of time, he can "see" the future even though it has not happened, without influencing it, or interfering with human free will. All times are present to God, even the future. But Swinburne and others have pointed out that this sort of God is meaningless to humans who live within time—us. God doesn't age, God isn't subject to decay, so for God to be connected to time in no way weakens God, for God is everlasting. God's sovereignty is not compromised by God's activity within time.

But grant that God *is* surrounding or encircling the human-in-history-timeline. The human timeline progresses as the present unfolds; God, surrounding the line, cannot see any part of the line that does not yet exist, i.e., "the future." If there are aspects of the future that God plans to and can bring about regardless of human choices, we can say that God "knows" them—but not in the same way as if they had already happened—not as if they are actual.

Scripture portrays God with intentions and determination to affect plans for the world. But, according to the Scriptures, the plans God has *for* humans are usually dependent on

² *The Coherence of Theism.*

human cooperation—the selected human must be called and obedient. Certain characters are called for purposes that influence others and carry out God’s plans. These people are rarely puppets unless the point in the story is to show how much more powerful God is than the powers of the world, as in the case of the Pharaoh of the Exodus.³ As I said at the beginning, there are additional biblical texts to bring into this discussion. But, in general, the Scriptures tell us that God always hopes for the best, desiring to bless a people who have freely chosen to cooperate with God in order to be shaped in God’s image, people who send rain and sun on the just and the unjust and forgive their enemies, their friends, and their families.

Post Conference Appendix

I would like to use the analogy of marriage that Dr. Fretheim used in his response to the papers. He stressed God’s commitment to previously made promises to G’s people, which I absolutely affirm. But I also affirm that God keeps promises not only because they are promises, but because the ever living, ever loving God presently, currently desires to remain faithful to the relationship. I remain married because I want to stay married and nurture my relationship with my husband in the present. There may come moments in any marriage that the spouse remains faithful because of promises, the marriage vows, and this is important, but in a good marriage, the reason for faithfulness is the love that exists between the partners. But this admits human variation in character. God continually loves us, actively and in the present. Just as all the decisions that led to G’s commitment to Israel and the nations are important, so are all those that led to my vows to my husband on June 8, 1974. But a past commitment is not the only reason I stay married. Of course God keeps promises, but God’s unchanging character means that the love that led to the promises is always abundant, current, and the active cause of the present graceful relationship.

Regarding my comment about Pharaoh above, which implied, in his case, YHWH used P’s hard heart to show YHWH’s power to save Israel. Several verses indicate that Pharaoh hardened his own heart, freely, but others explicitly say God hardened Pharaoh’s heart, as if the middle plagues would have softened it, so that YHWH would

³ I will expand on this in the post-conference appendix.

not have had the opportunity to produce even more plagues and the final acts of deliverance. Although I barely mentioned this in passing, I am admitting there are a few rare places that the narrator indicates God's power over what is usually human will. This is always for a specific purpose. I should not have said "puppet" for the narrator wants us to know that it was entirely in P's character to harden his own heart. But as another way to emphasize that YHWH, the God of Israel, is so much more powerful than the "divine" Pharaoh—the known God—this story indicates that YHWH even has control over P's hard heart. A Jewish midrash says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order to give him back his free will, lest the plagues be too coercive and thereby weaken or remove it.

An image that might provide some mediating grand in this discussion is one that comes from Kabbalah. The universes and time burst into being when the dark spark, or seed, enters the "everlasting womb." The spark is dark until it enters the womb when light explodes. The seed is alone until it germinates within the fertile ground of being that is itself unknown and invisible until it receives the seed. God, the creator of both, sees the seed/spark—so in that sense knows it and all it contains. But all it contains is not actual, until it expands and unfolds, so God does not see/know future events until they happen. This image is not perfect, but I am partial to stories and images, which is why I am partial to the Bible.