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The Passible Potter and the Contingent Clay: A Theological Study of Jeremiah 18:1–10[1]

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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 impassible God.[2] On the other hand, some, especially recently, have

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[1] In this title I use the word passible to connote the ability to be affected by someone external to oneself, whereas contingent is used to express that human actions and outcomes are not determined by God but are contingent upon human free will within limits (amongst other factors and circumstances).

[2] Feinberg notes regarding Jer 18:1-4, "Far too often many have misunderstood this parable because they have seen God in the light of an arbitrary sovereign, whereas the deeper level of meaning speaks of God's grace." Charles L. Feinberg, "Jeremiah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, ed. Frank Ely Gaebelein, J. D. Douglas, and Dick Polcyn, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 490. It is often used more specifically to express God's omnicausality and determinism. The potter and the clay was a foundational metaphor for both Martin Luther and John Calvin's rather Augustinian conception of the God-world relationship. See John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen, Calvin's Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: J. Clarke, 1961), 88-91; Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 120, 230. Contemporary authors continue this conception with nuance. See, for instance, Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 682-683; R. K. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations: An Introduction and Commentary*, ed. D.J. Wiseman, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1973), 108, John Piper, "Are

seen God as completely immanent, even to the extent of being the same as or one with the world.[3] How does Jeremiah 18 relate to such a conception of God? Is God transcendent, immanent, 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 (18:4)? Of great significance is the presentation of God as "relenting" (18:8,10). Does this threaten the immutability of God? Moreover, does it mean that God does not know the future? This passage illumines the biblical perspective on these and related issues.

This paper endeavors to look at Jeremiah 18:1-10 and ascertain the implications for the biblical view of God and His relationship to His creation.[4] The viewpoints of classical Greek philosophy, pantheism, process theology, and open theism will be briefly mentioned and compared with the perspective of Jeremiah. The way one views God and human history is of paramount importance to Christian theology. Therefore, it is vital 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 paraenesis from God.

The Potter and the Clay

The Immutable Potter. In the metaphor of the potter and the clay the sovereignty and transcendence of God are clearly emphasized. This paradigm is introduced when God instructs Jeremiah to observe the work of a potter shaping clay as a sign-act (18:2-3).[5] As Jeremiah observes the potter at his wheel, the clay becomes marred, and the potter then reacts and forms a different creation (18:4).[6] There is no indication of the cause

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There Two Wills in God?" in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 1:119-123, R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1986), 152-153, R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty: What's Wrong with Freewill Theism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 56-57, 179-196.

[3] See the discussion below in the section entitled, God's Transcendence Questioned.

[4] Verses from Jeremiah 18:1-10 are my translation. All other verses are taken from the NKJV.

[5] The action in view signifies something more profound. In other words, "in what God has the prophet see and do is a deeper meaning." John M. Bracke, *Jeremiah 1-29*, ed. Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett, Westminster Bible Companion (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 152.

[6] As one commentator puts it, "the potter's decision to alter his design illustrated the Lord's relationship to nations." R. B. Zuck, E. H. Merrill, D. L. Bock, *A Biblical Theol-*

of the mar, a puzzle to which we shall return.[7] As a potter is superior and powerful over the inferior clay, so God is sovereign over Judah.[8] God is also 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.[9] Further, just as the potter forms the clay, so God molded all creation.[10] 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.[11]

The Bible also states that God does not change (Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29 Mal 3:6; Jas 1:17).[12] However, what does this changelessness of God entail? Theologians sometimes present God as utterly transcendent, timeless, simple, and impassible.[13] In other words, he is conceived as

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ogy of the Old Testament, Logos Research Systems Electronic ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1996).

[7] The issue regarding the mar in the clay will be revisited in the context of the further information garnered from Jer 18:7-10 below.

[8] Furthermore, "This figure of the potter and the clay expresses the Lord's authority over his people and the importance of their submission to his will (Isa 29:16; 45:9; 64:8)." F. B. Huey Jr., *Jeremiah-Lamentations*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1993), 180. Brueggemann states, "The oracle asserts Yahweh's complete sovereignty and Israel's complete subservience." Walter Brueggemann, *Jeremiah 1-25: To Pluck up, to Tear Down*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 160.

[9] This metaphor is also prominent in Isa 29:16; 41:25; 64:8; Lam 4:2; Rom 9:21.

[10] John L. Mackay, *Jeremiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1 (Scotland: Mentor, 2004), 536. See Gen 2:7-8, 19; Exod 20:11; Ps 146:6; Neh 9:6; Job 12:7–9; Job 38:4–38; Isa 45:7,12,18; Jer 5:22; Rom 1:20; Heb 11:3,10; Rev 14:7.

[11] See also Gen 17:1; Gen 18:14; Job 42:2; Isa 26:4; Matt 19:26; Luke 1:37; Acts 26:8; Rev 19:6; Rev 21:22.

[12] On these texts that say God does not repent, John T. Willis correctly states, "The Bible nowhere indicates that the idea that God does not repent is a universal principle, but always with relation to a specific event or situation . . ." John T. Willis, "The "Repentance" Of God in the Books of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Jonah," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 16 D (1994): 168.

[13] This is often referred to as classical theism. For an exposition of this view see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols. (Allen: Christian Classics, 1981), John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), Stephen Charnock, *Discourses on the Existence and Attributes of God* (New York: R. Carter, 1882). Contemporary classical theists also believe God is simple, timeless, and impassible. More recently Owen defines classical theism "as belief in one God, the Creator, who is infinite, self-existent, incorporeal, eternal, immutable, impassible, simple, perfect, omniscient and omnipotent." Huw Parri Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (London: Macmillan, 1971), 1. For other contemporary forms of classical theism see Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father*

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."[14]

Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), Norman L Geisler, H. Wayne House, and Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001), Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), Wayne Grudem, Douglas S. Huffman, and Eric L. Johnson, eds., *God under Fire: Modern Scholarship Reinvents God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1993), Stephen E. Parrish, *God and Necessity: A Defense of Classical Theism* (Lanham: UP of America, 1997). While the above theologians affirm the timelessness, simplicity, and at least some form of the impassibility of God, the nuances and details regarding this issue by the above authors take various shapes and formulations.

It is important to recognize that the problem of God's passibility/impassibility is increasingly recognized by classical theists in light of the critique of process theology. Moreover, a diversity of responses abound and diversity exists regarding the attempts to counter the critiques of process theology and, more recently, open theism. It is beyond the scope of this paper to address the contemporary modifications and nuances of classical theism. It must be stated, however, that the contemporary articulations regarding God's impassibility have made some attempts to concurrently maintain God's activity *and* God's timelessness, simplicity, and impassibility, the effectiveness of which is disputed. For instance, consider Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002). It must be understood that it is specifically disputed by some classical theists that God's impassibility means that God is uncaring or "utterly devoid of any feelings" (Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes*, 161). Geisler contends that God may have emotional states but "His feelings are not the result of actions imposed upon Him by others" (Geisler, House, and Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism*, 170). He goes on to state unequivocally that "Scripture does teach that God cannot be acted upon by anything outside of Himself" (Geisler, House, and Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism*, 171). Thus it is clear that the central idea is that God cannot be affected, thus if He has emotions they are willed, unaffected emotions. See the footnotes below for a few specific examples.

[14] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 305. The implications for God's ability to relate to the world in light of the ontological assumptions of classical theism are disputed. For instance, Erickson denies immobility and sterility yet seems to maintain the undergirding ontological notions of classical theism. It is difficult to understand how one could reconcile the classical notions of God's timelessness, simplicity, and impassibility with an active and personal God. Erickson makes a scholarly and well-written attempt to reconcile these aspects in Erickson, *God the Father Almighty: A Contemporary Exploration of the Divine Attributes*. The reader is encouraged to consider whether ontological assumptions such as timelessness and impassibility allow for the affected (i.e., passible) God

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."[15] 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.

The Immanent Potter. 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.[16] God is personally communicating through Jeremiah to His people, Judah.[17] Thus, God is not presented as disconnected or static.[18] Rather, God is continually active in relationship to the world.[19] Throughout the OT, God

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presented in Jeremiah 18 and elsewhere. If not, it seems that such assumptions might require replacement in careful accord with ontological assumptions that are implicit in the Bible. See Fernando Canale, "The Quest for the Biblical Ontological Ground of Christian Theology," *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 16/1-2 (2005): 1-20.

[15] Bruce A. Ware, *An Evangelical Reexamination of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God*, Dissertation Presented to Fuller Theological Seminary (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Information Service, 1984), 11. This is a very interesting discussion of the immutability of God. Here is traced the historical views on God's immutability, where the view of a static God is seen as far back as patristic literature, though it was not dominant at this time. Augustine is seen as a great proponent of absolute changelessness, among others. The epochal synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy in Aquinas' work is also viewed as a bulwark for the view of God's immutability. Ware further demonstrates that the notions of an absolutely simple and static God have been widely accepted in the history of theology and wrestles with Evangelicalism's relationship to these conceptions.

[16] This is announced by the statement "the word of YHWH came" to Jeremiah, which is prominent in Jeremiah (Jer 1:2,4,11,13; 2:1; 13:3,8; 18:5; 24:4; 28:12; 29:30; 32:6,26; 33:1,19,23; 34:12; 36:27; 37:6; 42:7; 43:8) as well as the rest of the OT.

[17] This denotes God as a personal being who is intimately involved with His creatures. We know that these are the direct words of the Most High, a God who cares for His people.

[18] "A biblical theist not only believes that the one living God is separate from the world, as against pantheism and panentheism, but also that God is continually active throughout the world providentially." P. D. Feinberg, "Pantheism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 499.

[19] God's "sovereignty is tempered by mercy and patience. As the potter carefully reworks the clay to achieve the desired result, so God does not give up when we fail him" (Huey, Jr., 180). In contrast, Mackay claims that this is a picture of absolute sovereignty where "what he produces matches exactly what he intends" (Mackay, 536) Yet, if Mackay is correct, what about the mar in the clay?

is depicted as gracious, loving, longsuffering, merciful, and compassionate (Exod 34:6-7; Isa 63:7-14; Jer 31:3 Joel 2:13; Jon 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." [20] 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.[21] 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.[22]

God's Transcendence Questioned. 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."[23] A view that arose more recently that impacts contemporary theology is that of process theology, a kind of panentheism, which means literally "all in God."[24] Process theology holds that reality is constantly in flux, as the name would suggest. For

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[20] Huey, Jr., 181. Huey goes on, "If it became misshapen as he worked it, it was not because of his lack of skill. The clay may have been of an inferior quality, may have contained defects, or perhaps was not sufficiently moist and pliable" (181). This issue will be addressed further below.

[21] Mackay, 534. For an exposition of the nature of the potter's craft and the connection to Jeremiah 18, see Robert H. Johnston, "Biblical Potter," *Biblical Archaeologist* 37 D (1974): 86-106.

[22] That God is intimately involved in history beyond Judah is implied in the explanation regarding "a nation" or "a kingdom" in Jer 18:7-10, which is seemingly an explanation of the way God deals with a given nation. This framework is specifically applied to Judah in Jer 18:11.

[23] See Feinberg, "Pantheism," 887.

[24] Charles Hartshorne defines panentheism as "an appropriate term for the view that deity is in some real aspect distinguishable from and independent of any and all relative items, and yet, taken as an actual whole, includes all relative items." Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity, a Social Conception of God* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1948), 89. Process theology was shaped by the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. For more information on process theology see Hartshorne; John B. Cobb, Jr., *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976); William L. Reese and Eugene Freeman, eds., *Process and Divinity; the Hartshorne Festschrift* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1964); Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: Macmillan, 1929).

process theology, "to be real is to be in process."[25] While 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.[26] In this model, not only is the world in process, but God is also in process. This is opposed to the biblical view of creation *ex nihilo*.[27] Moreover, as the world progresses, so does God. He and the world experience growth throughout eternity. [28] This is problematic, as it denies the sovereignty and transcendence of the Creator God, among other things. Erickson clarifies the problem: "Dependence on the processes of the world compromises quite seriously the absolute or unqualified dimensions of God."[29] In this panentheistic 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."[30] From a biblical standpoint, clearly in Jeremiah 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.

God as Sovereign, Transcendent, *and* Immanent. God is depicted in Jeremiah 18 as sovereign, transcendent, *and* immanent. Specifically important is the fact that there is a clear difference between God and the

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[25] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 305.

[26] Erickson states, "there is an element of validity in process theology's criticism of some classical orthodoxy" (ibid., 306). Process theology also criticizes and rejects the Aristotelian view of Thomas Aquinas, held in line with many before him, that God is the "unmoved mover." Moreover, the predestinarian views of historical theology, exemplified in the theology of John Calvin, are also rejected.

[27] Charles Hartshorne states, "God formed the present universe out of an earlier universe and its potentialities for transformation." Before that was another and other world "*ad infinitum*." Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1984), 75.

[28] In this system God is the self-surpassing surpasser of all and thus supremely surrelative. See Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity, a Social Conception of God*, 90. Furthermore, Ware writes, "the very ontological structure of the being who is God guarantees that God is always and forever all-inclusive Receiver of all experiences. That he is this way is unchangeable and not in the slightest dependent on any entities external to him" (Ware, 263).

[29] Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 306.

[30] Norman R. Gulley, *Systematic Theology: Prologomena* (Berrien Springs: Andrews UP, 2003), 78. Gulley concludes his critique of process theology with the powerful statement that "Instead of a sovereign God with human freedom, it arrived at a finite (not free) 'god' with sovereign humans" (88).

world in this passage. The potter is God and the clay is His creation.[31] 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 one passage, it clearly does not lend itself to the view of pantheism or panentheism. Rather, it points to the theistic God who is different from the world He created.[32]

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, saying, "Woe to him who strives with his Maker! *Let* the potsherd *strive* with the potsherds 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'?" For Jeremiah, it is an absurd notion to suppose that the clay is greater or equal to the potter. Despite the lucid account of God's power, however, God's omnipotence should not be considered exclusive 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 verses 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 clearly are a stiff-necked people. 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 Jer 18:7-10.[33]

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[31] 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; Isa 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. The implications regarding the God-Judah relationship, specifically as it relates to ontology, are thus applicable regarding the wider God-world relationship.

[32] This difference is implied throughout the Bible, not least in the creation narrative. That God created the world out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) defines explicitly the difference between the eternal God and His creation.

[33] *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

God's Plan and Condition. This call to repentance illuminates the interaction of God's will with that of His people in verses 7-10. Based on the sinfulness of Judah God declares His plan to "pluck up, pull down, and destroy" (Jer 18:7).[34] The verb נָתַשׁ (*nātaš*), 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 Chr 7:20) and of her neighbors (Jer 12:14–15,17).[35] 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.[36]

Some theologians have held that this sovereignty of God negates human freedom. For instance, John Calvin held that God as potter represents the hidden purpose of God which determines all events in history. Referring to the possibility that this passage promotes free will, Calvin claims that these verses are merely accommodating language, whereas in

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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." L. Richards, *The Bible Reader's Companion* (Wheation: Victor, 1991), 459.

[34] Although in the history of interpretation there have been diverging claims regarding the authorship and dating, Jer 18:1-10 was quite possibly written in the late 7th century to early 6th century B.C. Thompson suggests this date based on the theme of the passage, since there is nothing explicit in the text to determine the date. J. A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 432. If this is the correct dating of the passage, then Jehoiakim was on the throne of Judah and under the control of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. These are the early years of the Babylonian captivity. The Exile was a result of the apostasy of Judah in their worship of false gods and their rejection of YHWH. Many of Jeremiah's prophecies directly related to the fall of Jerusalem, and the warning in this passage could very well be attributed directly to that end, especially the foreground of this passage.

[35] Milton C. Fisher, "נתש,"in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. L. Harris, Gleason Archer, B. K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 611. Notably, Fisher mentions that most often the subject of this verb is God, since this emphasizes His power.

[36] The covenant structure is prominent throughout the OT relationship of God to Israel. Thompson states, "The picture of the covenant is well to the fore, with its overtones of covenant stipulations, covenant sanctions, blessing and cursing. Israel would enjoy God's blessing only on the basis of obedience to his covenant" (Thompson, 435). The Word Biblical Commentary states, "Treaties and covenants regularly included conditions of the covenant. For the keeping of the covenant the lord promises blessings on the vassal; but for breaking covenant, the lord promises punishment for the vassal" (Peter C. Craigie, Page H. Kelley, and Joel F. Drinkard, Jr., *Jeremiah 1-25*, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker, and John D. W. Watts, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 26 (Dallas: Word, 1991), 245.

reality God has already unalterably decreed both human actions and His own.[37] However, does the text itself 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.

Verses 7-10 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:

> [7]*The moment I speak regarding a nation and kingdom*, to pluck up, to pull down, and to destroy it,

> [9]And *the moment I speak regarding a nation and kingdom*, to build and to plant it,

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.[38] Notice that to "pluck up" is the opposite of to "plant" and to "pull down" and to "destroy" is the opposite of to "build."[39] Both verse 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:

> [8]if that nation I spoke against turns (repents) from its evil, *I will relent* of the evil disaster that I planned to do to it.

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[37] Calvin, *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 398.

[38] These words are used together to describe a constructive act of God Himself (Cf. Jer 1:10; Jer 31:28. "In the metaphorical usages of this word pair it is always YHWH who is subject; and in Jeremiah, the object, when it is given, is always a group of people, primarily Israel." Bruce K. Waltke, "בנה," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 116. God is depicted as the divine planter, which is in harmony with God's depiction as potter (Cf. Jer 11:17). These actions clearly emphasize God's unique authority. This is clearly an act of God's grace (Cf. Jer 24:6; 31:4; 33:7).

[39] Further, this language is a clear allusion to the call of Jeremiah. Notice the extent of the parallel language: "See, I have appointed you this day over the nations and over the kingdoms, To pluck up and to break down, To destroy and to overthrow, To build and to plant" (Jer 1:10). In that call narrative God assures Jeremiah of his commission by communicating that He "formed" Jeremiah in the womb, from the same cognate (יֹשׁר) as the word for potter (cf. Jer 42:10).

¹⁰if it does evil in My sight so as to not obey My voice, then *I will relent* regarding the good that I said I would do to it.

Notice that in verse 8 the protasis of the conditional clause is the nation's turn from its evil; whereas in verse 10 the nation continues in evil.[40] In both cases God will "relent" accordingly.[41] In the apodosis of verse 8 God will "relent" from the evil; in verse 10 from the good. Both correspond directly to the decision of the nation.[42]

The Contingent Clay. In this parallelism God describes His covenant relationship to 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.[43] 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."[44] 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."[45] The call of God

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[40] Interestingly the repentant sinner is mentioned first in the parallel. Is it possible that God mentions this because this is the paradigm he wants to stress?

[41] Simian-Yofre notes that verses 8 and 10 form "two parallel casuistic formations" H. Simian-Yofre, "נחם," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck, Helmer Ringgren, and Heinz-Josef Fabry (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 346.

[42] However, it should be noted that there is a great deal of complexity involved in God's relationship to Judah. For instance, Mark E. Biddle points out that "The conditions established in vv. 7-11 do not indicate how God deals with a nation divided between a significant population of those who have failed to repent and a significant population of those who have responded properly to the warning." Mark E. Biddle, "Contingency, God, and the Babylonians: Jeremiah and the Complexity of Repentance," *Review & Expositor* 101/2 (Spring 2004): 250-251.

[43] John Sanders comments, "Jeremiah repeatedly speaks of the conditional ('if') in connection to both the clay (Israel) and the potter (God). If Israel repents, then God will relent. If Israel is recalcitrant, then God may change His mind regarding the promised blessing" (*The God Who Risks: A Theology of Providence* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1998], 86).

[44] R. E. Clements, *Jeremiah*, ed. James Luther Mays, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), 113. Moreover, "God's purpose allows the freedom of human response through repentance to determine the shape of the future" (Clements, 113-114).

[45] Patrick D. Miller, "The Book of Jeremiah: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible: A Commentary in Twelve Volumes*, ed. Harriett Jane Olson (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 714. We can then affirm that, "God is not a man that he should repent . . . he does not blow hot and cold. Yet he does *relent* when his peo-

serves as a divine warning and a real opportunity for the people to turn and be spared the consequences of rebellion.[46] Thus, the potter-clay metaphor includes a degree of freedom in human action.[47]

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."[48] A concrete biblical example of this conditional nature of God's actions is the narrative of Jonah. In Jonah 3:4, Jonah declares that Nineveh will be destroyed in forty days. Yet, the people of Nineveh repent and they are spared (Jon 3:9-10). Thus, we can see that in the Bible there is no problem with God's actions relating directly to the actions of human agents. God's relationship with humans transcends any metaphysical straightjacket of utter immutability.[49]

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ple turn to him; and this action of relenting is called *repentance."* "Jeremiah," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. C. F. Pfeiffer (Chicago: Moody, 1962), 671.

[46] Richard Rice explains, "God sends predictions of judgment precisely in hopes that they will not be fulfilled" ("Biblical Support for a New Perspective," in *The Openness of God : A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994], 32).

[47] Brueggemann states "that Israel can take an initiative, violates the metaphor, for Israel has freedom that the clay does not have. The clay cannot challenge the potter, but Israel can act so that Yahweh will change" (Brueggemann, 161). In other words, Judah as the clay is clearly not a determined, inanimate object since Judah has freedom that regular clay does not have. On the contrary, Holladay finds the lack of passivity in the metaphor as well, stating that "clay is not altogether passive. Any potter will affirm that because of the centrifugal force developed on the wheel the clay presses against the hands of the potter" (William Lee Holladay, *Jeremiah 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1-25*, ed. Paul D. Hanson, Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986], 515).

[48] Miller, 715. Carroll takes a negative view of verses 7-10, seeing it as a later addition that changes the meaning of verses 1-6 from a positive to a negative. Furthermore, he states, "The theoretical nature of vv. 7-10 with their image of a predictable deity contracting with nations and kingdoms a reciprocal agreement of corresponding and alternating the future is idyllic and unreal" (Robert P. Carroll, *Jeremiah: A Commentary*, The Old Testament Library [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986], 372). He contends that the concept of God's turning is "a very mechanical idea of turning and lacks any depth of content" (Carroll, 374). However, if one reads the passage in its received, canonical form, the wordplay and contrast between the balancing imagery is quite profound and nuanced, which would counter Carroll's claim of a lack of depth.

[49] Biddle contends that "God becomes involved in genuine relationships. The other actors are free to act as they will. Judah could have repented. God responds within the limitations established by the choices of God's partners" (Biddle: 263).

The consistency in the parallel between the nation that turns from evil and the nation that turns toward it is relating to the character of humankind. However, the character of God 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.[50] 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.[51] God proclaims in this call that He allows His creatures to choose the outcome rather than using His omnipotence to dictate all the events of history. His sovereignty is no less as His gracious and longsuffering call is exemplified.

The Mar in the Clay. The complexity of the potter-clay relationship, as seen in Jer 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.[52] As in the metaphor, there is also a mar in the post-fall world. Evil is pervasive alongside of the goodness in God's creation. For some, any mar in the clay questions either God's goodness or His omnipotence.[53] 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 answer these questions.

The nation has done evil "in God's sight" which is defined by the passage as "not obeying God's voice" (Jer 18:10). Evil is here defined as

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[50] "Yahweh as creator is guided in part by the response of nations and kingdoms. As they respond to him, so he responds to them" (Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, 245).

[51] Stoebe comments, "Yahweh is, on the one hand, the 'jealous God' . . . so he neither needs to regret a decision nor is he bound by it . . . and he is, on the other hand, 'gracious and merciful' . . . so plans for disaster need not be his last word."[51] H. J. Stoebe, "נחם," in *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, ed. Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 738.

[52] On the mar, "The text doesn't give any specifics; it merely states that for whatever reason the potter remade the vessel into one pleasing in his eyes" (Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, 244).

[53] A classic example of this position is David Hume's quotation of Epicurus, "Is he impotent? Is he able, but not willing [to prevent evil]? Then is he malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil? David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion: The Posthumous Essays of the Immortality of the Soul and of Suicide* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 63. This is the same question that was originally raised by the serpent against God when he claimed to Eve that she "would not surely die," thus claiming God as a liar (Gen 3:4).

what is opposed to God.[54] There is no evil in God; He is pure goodness (Ps 25:8; Nah 1:7; Jer 33:9; Rom 2:4).[55] God is not the proponent of evil (Jas 3:19), but a merciful and longsuffering God calling His people so that He can save them (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:9). It is interesting to recognize that "In 18:4 the passive verb 'was spoiled' and the words 'another vessel' point to the responsiveness of the potter."[56] In other words, the potter responds to a mar in the clay and re-makes the vessel.[57] 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 Jer 19:4-5, which expresses the infidelity and idolatry of Judah that extended even to child sacrifice (see also Rom 1:18-32).[58] 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)."[59]

The Relenting of God

According to the decision of the nation, verses 8 and 10 present God with the ability to "relent" from His purpose of disaster.[60] The idea of

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[54] In this way the passage implies that God is good and what is against Him is evil. This is a direct answer to the question of God's goodness and the problem of evil.

[55] "God is never said to have committed any sin of which God needs to repent" (Terence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Key to Evaluating Old Testament God-Talk," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 10 (June 1988): 50.

[56] Roger Mize, "The Patient God," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 7 (July 1972): 89.

[57] Thompson suggests that "the quality of the clay determined what the potter could do with it. He could make something else from the same clay, but not the particular vessel he had hoped for . . . Yahweh the potter was dealing with a clay that was resistant to his purpose" (Thompson, 433).

[58] The setting for this text is the Potsherd Gate overlooking the valley of Ben-Hinnom. This was a common place of child sacrifice to the pagan god Baal (Jer 19:1) (Duane F. Watson, "Hinnom Valley," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman [New York: Doubleday, 1996]). This geographical location is illustrative of the great sins that were taking place in Judah. YHWH clearly had reason to call His people to repentance, yet Judah refused to change and continued in rebellion and idolatry. The consequence was the eventual destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. It is clear, however, that Judah was not doomed to this fate, but through their rejection of God, they chose their own path of destruction.

[59] Mize: 88.

[60] 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.

God "relenting" troubles many a theologian and is important to analyze. The word translated relent (נָחַם) has a range of meaning including comfort, sorrow and grief, and regret or repentance.[61] Here, in the niphal, it signifies a conditional "relenting" by God.[62] 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? Secondly, 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.

The Changelessness of God. Is the "relenting" of God merely an anthropopathism, as has often been asserted throughout the history of theology?[63] The primary biblical passages that assert that God does not change include Num 23:19, 1 Sam 15:29, and Mal 3:6, respectively. These passages depict an unchanging God. The question is; 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. However, we have also seen that some hold that God is utterly immutable in such a manner as to be incapable of

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[61] H. Simian-Yofre, "נכם," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 346. Note that the root may connote emotions and/or a relenting/repenting. This is, by definition, an affective word.

[62] נָחַם in the niphal occurs most often with God as subject, often of God relenting (Gen 6:6-7; Exod 32:14; 2 Sam 24:16; 1 Chron 21:15; Ps 106:45; Jer 15:6; 18:8,10; 26:3,13,19; 42:10; Joel 2:13-14; Amos 7:3,6; Jon 3:9-10; 4:2), at other times with the connotation of God being "moved" (Judg 2:1; cf. Isa 57:6) and with a nuance of regret (1 Sam 15:11,35) See also the instances where it refers to God not relenting, which seem to be particular and not universal statements based on the context (1 Sam 15:29; Ps 110:4; Jer 4:28; 20:16; Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14) and intertextuality (i.e., 1 Sam 15:11,35). In fact, many appear to imply that God *could* relent but *would* not (i.e., Jer 20:16; Ezek 24:14; Zech 8:14), and such meaning likely applies to all instances in accordance with the overall usage of the term in niphal in Scripture. Isa 1:24 connotes a rare meaning of God ridding Himself of adversaries. Though it most often refers to God, it also is used with humans as subject and may refer to humans being comforted (Gen 24:67; 38:12; 2 Sam 13:39; Ps 77:2; Jer 31:15; Ezek 14:22), being grieved (Judg 21:6,15), or humans repenting (Exod 13:17; Job 42:6; Jer 8:6; 31:19; Ezek 31:16; 32:31) In Exod 32:12 it is a niphal imperative directed toward God by Moses (cf. Ps 90:13).

[63] Wilson, for instance, claims that "When *naḥam* is used of God, however, the expression is anthropopathic and there is not ultimate tension. From man's limited, earthly, finite perspective it only appears that God's purposes have changed" (Marvin R. Wilson, "נחם," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, 570-571). See also Feinberg, "Jeremiah," 491.

relationship.[64] 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."[65]

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.[66] Thus, I believe, the universal anthropomorphic nature of Scripture should not and cannot dismiss the direct statements of God about Himself.[67]

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.[68] Fretheim speaks of the "repentance" of God as

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[64] By the phrase "utterly immutable," God is seen as inactive and static. For traditional classical theism, this is seen as a necessary viewpoint that guards against any conception of a lack of perfection or need for growth in God. This paper finds this to be unwarranted in the biblical text. See the above footnote regarding classical theism for further information. It is the position of this paper that God may be spoken of as immutable in the sense that His being and character are constant, but He is not immutable in the sense that connotes the absence of vitality and the possibility of interrelationship with His created beings.

[65] "God Vs God: Two Competing Theologies Vie for the Future of Evangelicalism," *Christianity Today* 44/2 (2000): 34-35.

[66] Terence Fretheim lays out an excellent examination of this issue in relation to God's repentance. He states that "Metaphors do reveal an essential continuity with the reality which is God; they do in fact contain information about God. At the same time, they disclose that which is discontinuous with the divine reality." The danger is "either interpreting metaphors literally in every respect or (more commonly today) denying any essential relationship between the metaphor and God" ((Fretheim: 51).

[67] As D. M Beegle states, "It is precisely in the area of the personal that theism, as expressed in Christianity, must ever think in anthropomorphic terms. To regard God solely as Absolute Being of the Great Unknown is to refer to *him* or *it*, but to think of God as literally personal, one with whom we can fellowship, is to say *Thou*." ("Anthropomorphism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001], 67.

[68] Simian Yofre points out that here, "Yahweh's *nḥm* is offered as a possibility, conditional upon the people's return." Furthermore, "In Jer. 18:8,10, the relationship between *nḥm* and change of conduct has become an almost juridical formula (cf. Ezk. 14:12-20)" (Simian Yofre, 347). It is part of God's changeless character that He always responds

a "controlling metaphor" based on the attributes of love and mercy that were foundational to Hebrew thought (Exod 34:6-7; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2). He states, "God is revealed not as someone who is unbending or unyielding, as a focus on immutability suggests."[69] Rather, God is presented as the sovereign and transcendent potter *and* as immanent and *affected* God, active within His creation.[70] Thus God is the sovereign potter and the passible potter.[71]

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.[72] 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.[73] Thus, God can "relent" in this way with no negative implications regarding His constancy.

The Foreknowledge of God. The second problem of God's "relenting" relates to the foreknowledge of God. Some say that God actually

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based on His "juridical formula" or more personally, His covenant relationship with His people.

[69] Fretheim: 63.

[70] Note that "affected" here means that God interacts and relates to human choice and the world, not that God changes in His being or becomes. Based on this passage, as well as others, God has real relationship to the world. It is thus permissible to speak of a pathos of God which also includes the love of God which is fundamental to the Christian understanding of salvation history. Thus, it seems that rejection of any pathos of God negates the relationship of God to humanity, the very relationship that Jesus Christ died in order to reconcile. For biblical examples of God's dynamic and passible interaction with humans, see Gen 18:23-32; Exod 32:7-14; Ezek 18:26-31; Jon 4:2; Luke 13:34.

[71] God is passible in that He is capable of being affected, external actions may impact God's actions. It is this capability of being affected that is necessarily rejected by classical theists. Further, God is a God of emotion, and these emotions not only stem from His will but also operate in direct relationship to humans in relationship. See Isa 62:5; Ps 78:40; Eph 4:30; Exod 32:10; Ps 103:13; Isa 54:8; Ps 103:17. It is also important to note that God as potter does not entail omnicausality, even in the NT usage by Paul. 2 Tim 2:21-22 must be taken into account in balancing God's providence in shaping history with the freedom within limits He grants to His creatures.

[72] Moreover, "The biblical materials sense no incompatibility between God's honor and dignity and God's vulnerability and openness to change" (Fretheim: 64).

[73] 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" (Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 305).

changes His mind, meaning He receives totally new information because of the choice of a free agent.[74] In other words, it is asserted that because God is said to "repent," He must not have known the outcome of the people'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 deciding to do something and planning to do something. A plan may be conditional 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."[75] 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."[76] 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 God 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.

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[74]This is the position of the Open View of God, or, Free Will Theism. Among the main proponents of this view are Richard Rice, John Sanders, and Clark Pinnock. For more on this view, see Rice. See also William Hasker, *God, Time, and Knowledge*, Cornell Studies in the Philosophy of Religion (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989); Clark H. Pinnock, *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1989). For further delineations of this view, see Gregory A. Boyd, *God at War: The Bible & Spiritual Conflict* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1997); Sanders. For a thorough investigation and critique, see Millard J. Erickson, *What Does God Know and When Does He Know It?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003). See also William Lane Craig, *Divine Foreknowledge and Human Freedom: The Coherence of Freedom* (New York: Leiden, 1991); William Lane Craig, "Hasker on Divine Knowledge," *Philosophical Studies* 67 (1992): 57-78; Norman L Geisler, H. Wayne House, and Max Herrera, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001); Steve Nichols, "An Early Response to Open Theism," *Reformation and Revival* 12/2 (2003): 111-129.

[75] J.E. Smith, *The Major Prophets*, Logos Research Systems Electronic ed. (Joplin: College, 1992).

[76] Abraham Heschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 222.

The aforementioned case of Nineveh, where God also "relents" (Jon 3:4, 9-10; 4:2), is highly enlightening for this problem.

Another verse that involves the "repentance" or "relenting" of God is Gen 6:6. This verse sheds light on Jeremiah 18. "And the Lord was sorry [נָחַם] that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart." Here, the word נָחַם is better understood in the context of God's sorrow, or grief.[77] 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 an ontological change or growth in God, 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 of the words used for the nation's turning aside (שׁוּב) and God's "relenting" (נָחַם). שׁוּב means to physically turn or change course and here connotes the meaning of repentance.[78] 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.[79] The difference of words may imply the difference of meaning.

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[77] See Francis F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, "נחם," in *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: With an Appendix Containing the Biblical Aramaic* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), 636-637.

[78] In his seminal work Holladay emphasizes that שׁוּב is a "turn back (from evil)," and here the preposition "from" emphasizes the particular nuance of the turn, which recalls the imagery of a physical change in direction (William Lee Holladay, *The Root Subh in the Old Testament* [Leiden: Brill, 1958], 79). See especially the breakdown of this usage according to Holladay (80). "The qal is dominated by the physical movement of turning, turning around, returning, etc." (Heinz-Josef, "שׁוּב," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 478). It thus refers to a change of direction, here either a turn towards God and His will or away from Him (cf. Jer 4:1; 8:4,6; 15:7).

[79] The use of שׁוּב seems of even further importance when it is recognized that this word is used 111 times in 91 verses in the book of Jeremiah. Clearly, the word is a favorite of Jeremiah. Nevertheless, it was not chosen to refer to the repentance of God in the parallel verses of 7-10, thus implying a difference between human and divine "repentance." It should be noted that the semantic range of שׁוּב also includes divine action (Josh 24:20; Isa 1:3; Jer 32:40). Cf. Jer 18:4, where the potter in the metaphor "turns." The point being made regarding word usage is not regarding the semantic range of the word, but the selection of two different words in parallel, implying a nuance of meaning.

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 is in the Qal perfect in the Hebrew, which is normally translated as past. It seems, however, that the form here should be interpreted as prophetic perfect. In this way it is used to "express completeness and factuality" of a future event.[80] 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.[81] God's "relenting" is not a weakness, but part of His merciful character. God's "relenting" 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 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."[82] Therefore, Jer 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.

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[80] Christo H. J. van der Merwe, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 146, 364.

[81] 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," yet clearly in response to a future problem of sinful humanity (Rev 13:8).

[82] Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Introductory Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), 128. Wiersbe notes that "He [God] has the sovereign freedom to alter His actions depending on the responses of the people" (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Decisive: An Old Testament Study* [Wheaton: Victor, 1996], 85).

Conclusion

Clearly, 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. Thus, it is recognized that 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 God's relationship with the world. God is omnipotent, sovereign, and almighty over all creation. There is no other like Him. God as the potter is the unchangeable One, yet this need not preclude His relationship with the world. Rather, the metaphor presents God as not only sovereign and transcendent, but also immanent and interactive with the world at a personal level. The tension between the transcendence and immanence of the Almighty is not problematic for Jeremiah. Rather, both are upheld in order to describe YHWH. This God does not change *and* enters into relationship with His creation.

Thus, Jeremiah 18 affirms that God is both sovereign and passible. 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" (Exod 3:14) and the passible potter, capable of dynamic interaction with the world.[83] Yet, the sign-act of God as potter precludes the implication that God lacks power. Rather, He freely chooses to allow a measure of freedom. This metaphor thus points towards a view of God as the biblical God of sovereignty and passibility, love and justice, held in union, not in exclusivity, one God of intimate relationship *and* transcendent omnipotence.

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[83] It must be understood that God as passible potter does *not* mean that God changes in His being or that He is in any way progressing or becoming towards 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.