

# Yahweh's Disappointed Expectation in Jeremiah 3

## Description

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Recently, I was writing more of [Are You Minding What Matters?](#) – specifically, I was writing a section dealing with theological possibility-denial; that is, theological views that amount to a denial that genuine possibility exists. The two views I wrote on are predestination and exhaustive, infallible divine foreknowledge. In [Are You Minding What Matters?](#) I deal with the issue of whether these doctrines could be true in material reality but I don't address what Scripture has to say on these issues. So, I thought I'd take the opportunity here in the blog to comment, at least briefly, on the scriptural aspect. In this post, I'm only dealing with divine foreknowledge (and timelessness). Is there anywhere in ancient Jewish scripture that says that God knows the entire future in every detail – exhaustively and infallibly? You can look and there simply isn't anything that states this. In fact, there are plenty of passages in Jewish Scripture that wouldn't make much sense if one assumes that the scriptural authors held to that doctrine. And some of these passages imply a very different view. Of course, if you come to a text with the belief that it must not conflict with a certain doctrine you hold, it is possible to stretch and bend your interpretation of the text to fit your view, but to state it frankly, that way of reading lacks integrity. Consider this passage from Jeremiah and just try to understand what it says without any preconceptions or doctrinal requirements as to how it must be interpreted. This is from Jeremiah 3:6-7

3:6 And Yahweh said to me in the days of Josiah the king, “Do you? see what she did? Turncoat – Israel – she went upon every high hill and beneath every spreading tree, and she prostituted there.

3:7 And I said, ‘After she has done all these things, she will return to me,’ but she has not returned and her false sister Judah saw it. – Jeremiah 3:6-7 (my translation)

What is Yahweh saying in this text? Quite plainly, he is telling Jeremiah to look at Israel and to take note of her prostitution (from verse 8 it is clear that this refers to Israel serving other gods). Then, Yahweh relates to Jeremiah that when Israel started doing this, he (Yahweh) said (to himself), “After she has done all these things, she will return to me.” In other words, Yahweh is saying that he expected that Israel would stop going after other gods and would return to sole devotion to Yahweh. The next part is really important. After relating his expectation, Yahweh then says to Jeremiah, “but she has not returned.” In other words, what Yahweh expected to happen did not happen. This certainly does not sound like a God who exists outside of time, with the entire future laid out before him. Nor does it sound like a God who, though experiencing time, has an exhaustive and infallible knowledge of all future events. If Yahweh already knew that Israel wouldn't return to him, why did he expect that Israel would return to him? and if you say that he didn't expect Israel to return to him, aren't you just flatly disagreeing with this passage in Jeremiah?

The most common way for people to attempt to affirm exhaustive infallible divine foreknowledge

while convincing themselves that they aren't rejecting Jeremiah is to say something like, "This is just describing God using anthropomorphic language. It is just ascribing to God the attributes of humans so that we can relate to him more and understand him better. But in reality, God is beyond time and has complete knowledge of the entire future." First of all, it must be acknowledged that this explanation is not found in the text. It is an imposition onto the text, not something derived from the text. Secondly, if it is written the way it is in order to help us understand God better, what exactly is it supposed to make us understand about God? It sure seems like the idea that we are supposed to understand is that Yahweh expected Israel to return to him, but that she didn't. While he had the expectation, he waited, but after his expectation was disappointed, he cut ties with Israel, or divorced her as it says in the next verse, verse 8. If this passage is designed to teach us something about God, it certainly seems that what it teaches is that God experiences time moment-to-moment in much the same way we do; that he forms expectations of what might happen in the future that are sometimes disappointed. This God dynamically interacts with other beings in real time. He interacts with us in one way, but if we do something unexpected, He might change His behavior toward us accordingly. Again, if we say that this passage is written to help us relate to God better, doesn't the doctrine of an ultimately timeless God destroy that? I'd say this passage does actually help us to relate to God better, but only if we actually take it for what it says and understand that God is a God in time, not beyond time. That is relatable. But the moment we bring in our timeless God, or a God that knows every detail of the future, we destroy the chances of this text to make God more relatable. And further, it would just make a passage like this misleading.

The simple truth is that Jeremiah didn't believe in a timeless God and Jeremiah didn't believe that God knows the entire future exhaustively. Rather, Jeremiah's God, Yahweh, is a God in time who dynamically interacts with other beings moment-to-moment. He is a God who has future hopes and expectations and whose hopes and expectations can be disappointed. He is a God who forms his thoughts in succession, one after another, in response to what is currently happening. Those of you who are familiar with [other things I've written about God and time](#) know that a timeless God simply cannot exist. This God (Jeremiah's God), on the other hand, is perfectly possible.