

**THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION: CORPORATE CALLING OF A PEOPLE
WITH CONDITIONAL INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPATION IN THE ELECT**

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INTRODUCTION

The two dominant soteriological systems—Calvinism and Arminianism—have vied for dominance since the early seventeenth century, with each system gaining and losing ascendancy in different locales at different times. Calvinism historically dominated among Presbyterians and the English Puritans. Anglicanism has had supporters of both systems. Distinct Baptist groups have favored each system, with some denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), having supporters of both systems within their ranks. The Methodist church and other denominations in the Wesleyan tradition have generally espoused an Arminian soteriology.¹

Classical Pentecostal fellowships—such as the Assemblies of God, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, and Church of God (Cleveland)—have traditionally leaned predominantly to the Arminian understanding, partially due to their roots in the Wesleyan holiness revivals of the late nineteenth century. Due in part to overwhelmingly cessationist views among Calvinists such as B.B. Warfield and Charles Hodge, Pentecostals were reluctant to embrace other parts of their theologies, such as their views on the detailed workings of salvation.

However, beginning in the latter decades of the twentieth century, the growing acceptance of Charismatic spirituality among independent churches and traditionally cessationist groups such as the SBC has led to a theological cross-pollination. The defense of the ongoing supernatural working of the Spirit by theologians such as Wayne Grudem and Sam Storms has led to the use of their books in Pentecostal Bible colleges and seminaries. The emphasis of

¹ “An Assemblies of God Response to Reformed Theology,” Position Papers, last modified August 3, 2015, accessed March 30, 2017, http://ag.org/top/Beliefs/Position_Papers/pp_downloads/pp_response_to_reformed_theology_08_2015.pdf.

pastors such as John Piper and David Platt on world evangelization—one of the key purposes in the formation of the Pentecostal fellowships a century ago—has contributed to their growing popularity among the rising generation of Pentecostal ministers. Along with their pneumatology and missiology, Pentecostal students are being exposed to and influenced by these teachers' Calvinist soteriology as well.

The debate over soteriology currently threatens to divide the Southern Baptist Convention. Proponents of both Calvinism and “SBC Traditionalism” (which generally takes the Arminian stance on election, predestination, and the extent of the atonement, while rejecting the idea that a saved person can ultimately forfeit his or her salvation) have become entrenched, with the leadership of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary defending the traditionalist view, while Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kentucky are led by Calvinist scholars. It is important for Pentecostal scholars not to sit on the sidelines in this debate, simply relying on their traditional, historic positions. Rather, Pentecostals must follow their forbears' lead and examine the Scriptures in a search for the biblical truth concerning this important doctrine.

One of the key areas of the soteriological debate centers around election. Key questions include whether God elects people because they have put their faith in Christ, or does God's choosing of people produce their faith in Christ.² Does God predestine some individuals to believe and receive salvation, and others to not believe and therefore be judged? Or does He simply determine that those who choose to believe will receive eternal life, and those who refuse

² Sam Storms, *Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 22.

to believe will receive eternal punishment, without explicitly determining which individuals will believe and which will not?

This paper examines the concept of election in the Old Testament, the intertestamental literature of Second Temple Judaism, and the New Testament. Following this historical and scriptural survey, the study concludes with an explanation as to why a corporate view of election, in which individual persons are conditionally included, best combines and accounts for the biblical and intertestamental data.

ELECTION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Hebrew Words Related to Election

The principal Hebrew word in the Old Testament for the idea of election is *בָּחַר* (*bāḥar*), which “expresses the idea of deliberately selecting someone or something after carefully considering the alternatives”³. This verb appears 170 times in its various forms in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. It refers to a variety of choosing activities: Lot’s choice of the well-watered Jordan plain when he and Abraham parted ways (Gen. 13:11); Joshua’s choice of men to fight the Amalekites (Ex. 17:9); Moses’ appointing elders to assist him in hearing the Israelites’ complaints (Ex. 18:25); God’s choosing the people of Israel (Deut. 4:37; 7:6, 7; 10:15; 14:2); God’s selection of a specific place where He was to be worshiped (Deut. 12:5, 11, 14; 14:24, 25); and the choice by the people of Israel concerning which deity they would serve (Josh. 24:15, 22; Jud. 10:14). The majority of occurrences of *bāḥar* have YHWH as the subject. Most of these are repeated references to God’s choosing the patriarchs, the people of Israel, and the designated place for sacrifices and worship.

³ J.I. Packer, “Election,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., eds. D. R. W. Wood et al, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 306.

In addition to the verb *bāḥar*, the cognate adjective בָּחִיר (*bāḥîr*), meaning “chosen,” appears thirteen times in the Old Testament. It never refers to those chosen by human beings, but always designates the object of divine choice. First Samuel uses *bāḥîr* for Saul and David. The Psalms call both Moses (Ps. 106:23) and the whole people of Israel (Ps. 105:6) by this term. Isaiah 42 uses it to refer to the Servant of the Lord.⁴

Specific Old Testament Examples of Election

One of the most prominent themes in the Old Testament is God’s election of Israel to be His special people.⁵ The election of the Hebrew nation begins with YHWH’s call to Abram. YHWH tells Abram to leave his ancestral home and follow YHWH’s leading to a new land, which God promises to give to Abram and his descendants, who do not yet exist as Abram has no children at this point. God promises to bless Abram and make him a great nation. Not only will Abram be blessed—both by God and by other peoples—he in turn will be a blessing to all the peoples of the earth (Gen. 12:1–3).

God repeats this promise to Isaac in Genesis 26:3–5, and again to Isaac’s son Jacob in Genesis 28:14–15. It becomes clear that YHWH is not simply choosing a family to whom He can show favor. Rather, He is establishing a nation, Israel, to be His own special people. Choosing to establish this chosen people is not primarily about *them*. It is about God’s larger purpose of what He plans to do *through* them.⁶ This election is not just for the benefit of the elect, but for that of the world at large, the entire fallen race of Adam. “The point of Israel’s

⁴ A. Chadwick Thornhill, “Election,” in *Lexham Theological Wordbook*, eds. D. Mangum et al, (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014), electronic edition.

⁵ Charlie Trimm, “Did YHWH Condemn the Nations When He Elected Israel? YHWH’s Disposition Toward Non-Israelites in the Torah,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 55, no. 3 (September 2012), 521.

⁶ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 804.

election was not ‘for the creator God to have a favorite people’ but *for the sin of Adam to be dealt with.*⁷ God is beginning to lay the foundation for sending the Messiah, who will put the world back in order.

God also chose, or elected, individual persons from among the chosen nation for specific purposes or tasks. He chose Joseph, Jacob’s favorite son, to preserve the lives of his own family and the entire nation of Egypt through the wise administration of resources (Gen. 45:5). He chose Moses for the task of leading the captive people of Israel out of bondage in Egypt (Ex. 3:10). God chose Moses’ brother, Aaron—and his descendants after him—for priestly service in the tabernacle (Ex. 28:1). After the death of Moses, God appointed Joshua to lead the people of Israel in the conquest of Canaan (Deut. 31:23). After the Israelites took control of the land of Canaan, the LORD appointed judges (e.g., Gideon, Jud. 6:14; Samson, Jud. 13:5) to lead Israel against their enemies. He chose Samuel to be a priestly prophet (1 Sam. 3:19-20), through whom he selected Saul (1 Sam. 9:17) and David (1 Sam. 16:12) as kings.

The selection of David as king provides an interesting example of negative election. In 1 Samuel 16, when the prophet Samuel is seeking a replacement for Saul among the sons of Jesse, there is a thrice-repeated negative choice concerning the elder sons (1 Sam. 16:8, 9, 10).⁸ When David, the youngest son, arrives from tending the sheep in the field, God tells Samuel, “Rise and anoint him. This is the one” (1 Sam. 16:12).⁹ In the same pattern displayed in the selection of Isaac and Jacob, the firstborn—whom one would expect to receive preference based on the culture of primogeniture—was passed over for the youngest. This was not an unconditional,

⁷ Ibid., 1025.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *David’s Truth: In Israel’s Imagination and Memory*, 2nd ed., (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 18.

⁹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Scripture come from the New International Version 2011.

arbitrary choice, however; God told Samuel that He was looking at the heart, rather than the external factors (such as height, strength, and physical appearance) that human beings consider when selecting a leader (1 Sam. 16:7). When God chose David to serve as king, He chose someone already following after Him.

What did it mean for other nations in the Ancient Near East when God chose Israel as His special elect people? Did Israel's blessing mean the other peoples were excluded from salvation and cursed? On the contrary, the election of Israel as God's chosen people to a special place in His plan did not mean the rest of the world was cast off. It was possible for anyone from another nation to become a proselyte and enjoy the benefits of being part of the elect.¹⁰ Moses' father-in-law Jethro was a Midianite, yet his descendants are later listed as among those living in Judah's territory (Jud. 1:6; 4:11).¹¹ The Canaanite Rahab recognized the greatness of Israel's God and not only became part of the people of Israel, but of the lineage of King David—as did Ruth the Moabite.

The fate of other nations *as nations* appears tied to their treatment of the chosen people. They placed themselves on a spectrum ranging from *non-elect* (those who simply were not part of Israel) to *anti-elect* (those who actively opposed and mistreated the descendants of Jacob) based on how they responded to Israel, and on their attitude toward YHWH.¹² God responded to the other nations based on His promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3, blessing those who blessed Israel, and punishing those who cursed them.

¹⁰ Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election*, (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 198.

¹¹ Trimm, 530.

¹² *Ibid.*, 534-535.

Both Edom and Amalek rejected Israel and YHWH. Edom did not allow Israel to pass through their territory on their way to Canaan. But the Amalekites actively launched a military attack on the Israelites as they were traveling. Based on this harsher treatment of Israel by Amalek, God ordered that nation's destruction. Edom, however, was never under such an order from God.¹³

ELECTION IN SECOND TEMPLE JEWISH LITERATURE

To reach a better understanding of the idea of election held by the New Testament writers, one must take into consideration how Jews of the Second Temple period understood the concept. The intertestamental literature—while not authoritative as canonical Scripture—does prove useful in the study of election. It sheds light on the Jewish thought world which surrounded and influenced the writers of the New Testament, whether they agreed with and incorporated its ideas, or reacted to them negatively.

Jewish views of election in the Second Temple period fall into three basic categories. The “national and unconditional” view held that eternal life was assured to every Israelite based on God’s original choosing of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to form a people for himself. In this view, collective or individual merits did not influence the elect status. The “national and cooperative” view said that the merits of both the patriarchs and later Israel, combined with the gracious choice of God, led to the national election of Israel. The “remnant-oriented and conditional” view saw the unrighteous as made up of the other nations and apostate Israelites, while the righteous elect consisted of a preserved faithful remnant who kept the covenant stipulations. Continued membership in the elect people of God required observance of God’s instruction in

¹³ Ibid.

the Torah. In all, Jewish thought concerning election contained both conditional and unconditional elements.¹⁴

The “national and unconditional” view not only saw election as pertaining to the nation as a group, it set forth that each individual descended from Jacob was part of the elect based on his or her genealogical connection to the patriarch. The promises of the covenant applied to each individual Jew regardless of one’s level of adherence to the stipulations of the covenant.¹⁵

Enoch places an emphasis on the character of the elect, representing the “national and cooperative” view. God covenants with those who are faithful to what He expects in a covenant relationship.¹⁶ *Jubilees* contains a negative example of this conception of election in practice, with lack of merit keeping some from being included in the covenant. God rejected Ishmael and Esau because He “knew them” (Jub. 15:30), implying God foresaw that they would not be faithful to the covenant God made with Abraham.¹⁷ Even though they were descendants of Abraham, their faithlessness kept them from being included in the corporate body of the elect.

An example of the “remnant-oriented and conditional” view can be found in the *Community Rule* of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Qumran community considered that God chose their group to be His remnant. Membership in the group was conditioned on an individual’s submission to the group’s leadership and the community’s regulations.¹⁸ The *Testaments of the*

¹⁴ A. Chadwick Thornhill, *The Chosen People: Election, Paul and Second Temple Judaism*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 17–20.

¹⁵ F. Leroy Forlines, *Classical Arminianism: A Theology of Salvation*, (Nashville, TN: Randall House, 2011), 103.

¹⁶ Thornhill, *Chosen People*, 35.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

Twelve Patriarchs conditions God's restoration and blessing of the people on repentance and faithful obedience by the remnant.¹⁹

Concerning the topic of predestination, Second Temple literature seems fairly consistent. Rather than individuals being predestined to salvation or damnation, certain outcomes are predestined for those who live certain ways. According to *Jubilees* 5:13, God does not ordain a predetermined future that *must* take place, but does determine the consequences that will follow a certain course of action.²⁰ In *Wisdom of Solomon*, the overall message seems to be that God wants all people to seek Wisdom through repentance, and that God allowed the conquest under Joshua to proceed slowly for the purpose of giving the Canaanites an opportunity to repent before Israel destroyed them.²¹ If they had repented of their wickedness and turned to YHWH as their God, they would have been incorporated into God's people instead of being destroyed.

ELECTION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Greek Words Related to Election

The Greek verb corresponding to the Hebrew *bāḥar* in the Septuagint and the New Testament is ἐκλέγομαι (*eklegomai*). The New Testament writers use this verb twenty-two times. It appears only in the middle voice, giving it a reflexive sense of one choosing or picking out something or someone "for oneself."²² Across its varying contexts in Greek literature, three factors seem common: (1) there are several objects or persons from which to make a choice; (2) the chooser makes a judgment as to which of the objects or persons under consideration is most

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 118.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 187.

²¹ Trimm, 535.

²² Packer, "Election," 306.

suitable for the chooser's purpose; and (3) the chooser makes the choice freely, with no duress or coercion.²³

The New Testament writers use *eklegomai* to refer to: Jesus selecting twelve of His disciples and naming them apostles (Luke 6:13); God's choice of His Son as the Savior (Luke 9:35); Mary of Bethany choosing what is better by learning at Jesus' feet (Luke 10:42); guests picking the best seats at banquets (Luke 14:7); God's designation as to whether Barsabbas or Matthias should take Judas' place (Acts 1:24); God choosing the ancestors of His people Israel (Acts 13:17); and the election of believers in Christ before the world's foundation (Eph. 1:4), among others.

The Greek adjective corresponding to the Hebrew *bāhîr*—ἐκλεκτός (*eklektos*)—appears twenty-three times in the New Testament. It means “chosen” or “elect,” and whereas *eklegomai* is used of both divine and human choices, *eklektos* in the NT always refers to people or angels chosen by God.²⁴ The New Testament writers often use the adjective as a substantive meaning “the chosen one.” In John 1:34, John the Baptist calls Jesus “God's Chosen One” using this word. Luke 23:35 shows that *eklektos* served as a designation for the Messiah in Jesus' day.²⁵

The New Testament also uses the noun ἐκλογή (*eklogē*), “election,” which appears seven times. As with the adjective *eklektos*, this noun always refers to the result of God's act of choosing.²⁶ Several instances of *eklogē* in the Greek NT appear in the genitive (“of election”) following another noun, and therefore are rendered in English as the adjective “chosen.”

²³ Moises Silva, “ἐκλέγομαι,” *NIDNTTE* 2:145–52.

²⁴ Thornhill, “Election.”

²⁵ Packer, “Election,” 307.

²⁶ Silva, 149.

In addition to these words which are all from the same root, the New Testament also uses αἰρέω (*haireō*) three times, all in the middle form αἰρέομαι (*haireomai*), which means to take for oneself or to select. Two of the occurrences deal with choosing between two or more options (Phil. 1:22 and Heb. 11:25). The third occurrence (2 Thess. 2:13) relates to choosing people, and is the only use of *haireō* in a religious sense in Greek literature.²⁷

Closely related to the concept of election is the idea of predestination. The Greek word most frequently translated “predestine” is προορίζω (*prooridzō*). It means “to decide beforehand,” but does not inherently contain the idea of determinism (that what is predestined *must* occur).²⁸ This word appears three times in the New Testament: once in Acts (4:28), and twice in the same passage in Romans (8:29 and 8:30).

Specific New Testament Passages Related to Election

Not many scholars on either side of the soteriology question deny that, in the Old Testament, the primary image of election is corporate. John Piper and Douglas Moo, who both find individual election to salvation in Paul’s thought in the New Testament, concede that Paul would have only encountered corporate election in the Hebrew Scriptures.²⁹ God’s promise to Abraham to bless all the families of the earth through him signified that Abraham’s descendants were selected as a group for the purpose of bringing the Savior into the world. Scholars also agree that the selection of individuals in the Old Testament primarily involved calling a particular person who was already a member of the chosen people for a special position of

²⁷ H. Schlier, “αἰρέομαι, αἵρεσις, αἰρετικός, αἰρετίζω, διαίρέω, διαίρεσις,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:180.

²⁸ Thornhill, *Chosen People*, 219.

²⁹ Brian J. Abasciano, “Corporate Election in Romans 9: A Reply to Thomas Schreiner,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 49, no. 2 (June 2006), 353-4.

service or leadership (e.g. Moses, Joshua, Samson, Gideon, Samuel, David, Isaiah, and Jeremiah).

Concerning the New Testament, however, one finds less consensus among scholars with regard to the precise meaning and implications of election language, as will be presented below. Some see unconditional individual election to salvation. Others find individual election to salvation based on God's foresight of which individuals will believe. Yet others see primarily corporate election to salvation with conditional inclusion of individuals in the elect body. One also finds other aspects of election, such as selection of individuals for special service.

This paper will now proceed to a detailed study of New Testament passages that either contain the Greek words from the preceding lexical overview, or are conceptually related.

John 1:12–13

¹²Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—¹³children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

These verses do not contain explicit election language, but they do come into play in discussions of the order of events in salvation. Reformed teachers claim that God elects an individual for salvation in eternity past. When the point arrives in human history for that person to be converted, the Holy Spirit regenerates the unbeliever, bringing a spiritually dead person to life and giving him or her a new heart of flesh. Once the person is born again, he or she can exercise the faith that regeneration grants, in order to trust in Christ and be saved.

But the verses do not say that people first were born again, and then exercised faith. The natural order has the person believing in verse 12, then being spiritually born in verse 13.³⁰ This

³⁰ Forlines, 152.

comports with Galatians 3:2, which says that the Galatian Christians received the Spirit—who gives new birth—by believing the gospel they had heard.

Upon careful consideration, this passage is not teaching that an individual’s willful decision to exercise faith has no part to play in the new birth. Rather, it is contrasting the Jewish idea of election by biological descent from Abraham—where one became part of the elect people of God because his or her parents decided to have a child—with birth into the family of God through belief in the incarnate Word.

John 15:16

¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you.

This verse is frequently cited by Calvinists to show that fallen human beings do not choose God; rather, He chooses them. In this context, Jesus is speaking to his closest followers on the eve of His crucifixion. While there may have been a few other disciples present, his main audience was the Twelve. They had not submitted applications to study with Rabbi Yeshua ben Yosef in His traveling school—He had taken the initiative and called them to leave everything to follow Him.

However, there were many more disciples of Jesus to whom the New Testament text never records Jesus saying, “Come, follow me.” Among these are: Lazarus, Mary, and Martha, siblings who lived at Bethany and apparently never traveled with Him (John 11:1); Mary Magdalene, Joanna the wife of Chuza, and Susanna—women who followed Jesus and helped support His ministry out of their own resources (Luke 8:1–3); Nicodemus, a leading Pharisee who came to Jesus at night to ask about the Kingdom of God (John 3:1) and later helped bury

Jesus' body (John 19:39); and Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Jewish council (John 19:38). There is no biblical record of Jesus calling and choosing these individuals as He did the Twelve, yet no serious person would exclude them from the community of the faithful elect.

This verse is therefore best understood as representing election for the purpose of special service rather than illustrating the idea of unconditional election to salvation. The verse explicitly states the reason for which Jesus chose these people: to go and bear fruit. Thus, this verse refers to the call to be Apostles (those who are sent with a purpose).³¹

Acts 13:46–48

⁴⁶Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: “We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “ ‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’ ”

⁴⁸When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.

Calvinists often use these verses, which conclude a section describing the evangelistic efforts of Paul and Barnabas in Pisidian Antioch, to support the idea that God chooses certain people beforehand for salvation and then grants those specific individuals the faith necessary to respond to the gospel message. John Piper equates the “appointment” in verse 48 to election, saying that this election is not the result of foreseen faith, but rather the cause of these new believers’ faith.³²

Sam Storms calls verse 48 “a marvelous and forthright declaration of unconditional election.”³³ This is problematic in that Storms imports the “unconditional” qualifier based on his

³¹ Shank, 40.

³² John Piper, “Five Reasons to Embrace Unconditional Election,” *Desiring God Blog*, July 9, 2013, <http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/five-reasons-to-embrace-unconditional-election> (accessed February 14, 2017).

³³ Sam Storms, *Chosen for Life: The Case for Divine Election*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 99.

soteriological assumptions. There is nothing in this text to specify how the “appointment to eternal life” occurred.

Proponents of unconditional election treat the verb used here—the perfect passive participle of *τάσσω* (*tassō*)—as a divine passive, holding that the originator of the action is God, since the text does not name a specific agent. However, it is possible that this understanding is due more to the influence of the Latin Vulgate than to the sense of the original Greek penned by Luke. In Jerome’s translation of this passage, he used the word *praeordinati* (preordained, appointed beforehand) to translate the Greek *τεταγμένοι* (*tetagmenoi*). This Latin word consists of two parts, *ordinati* (“ordained”) and the prefix *prae* (“before”). The Greek, however, does not have the corresponding prefix *προ* (*pro*).³⁴ Thus the idea of the Gentiles’ faith being divinely determined at some point in the past, while not a complete impossibility, is not explicit in the text.

Another potential problem with the idea of these Gentiles being unconditionally appointed to salvation in eternity past is the fact that “*all* who were appointed to eternal life believed.” Understanding *tetagmenoi* in a predestination sense would seem to indicate that of the Gentiles who heard Paul and Barnabas that specific day, all who were ever going to come to faith believed on that very day, with no other Gentile who was present ever being converted afterward.³⁵

A more accurate translation here could be “were disposed.” Brian Abasciano points out that when the agent of a passive verb is not explicitly stated, the subjects of the passive verb can themselves be the agents. These Gentiles may have, over time, become disposed to receive

³⁴ Shank, 184-185.

³⁵ Forlines, 165-6.

eternal life in part by their own search for truth that brought them to the synagogue to hear these two traveling Jewish preachers. In verse 46, Paul says that the unbelieving Jews did not consider themselves worthy of eternal life. The Gentiles who believed, on the other hand, by their belief demonstrated their preparedness for eternal life.³⁶

If these Gentiles did not already possess a favorable disposition toward the things of God, it is unlikely they would have come back Sabbath after Sabbath to hear Paul and Barnabas. Luke writes, “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad.” They were not hostile opponents fighting against the truth of God who suddenly had a change of heart, but rather were already seeking truth and rejoiced when they heard that eternal life was also available to them without having to undergo the formal process of conversion to Judaism. They met the criteria for eternal life by having faith—the same way that Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gal. 3:6).

It is not unreasonable to say that some of the Gentiles who believed Paul and Barnabas’ message may have already been saved in the way faithful Jews were saved before the coming of Christ: through believing in God’s redemptive plan contained in the revelation of the Jewish Scriptures. In that case, verse 48 would mean that everyone who already had saving faith in the Old Testament sense believed the gospel proclamation when they heard it, because in it they recognized the fulfillment of the Old Testament promises in which they already believed.³⁷

Whether the agent in disposing these Gentiles to believe was God—via a direct act of changing their hearts—or the Gentiles themselves through a period of seeking truth in learning

³⁶ Brian Abasciano, “A Conversation About the Translation of Acts 13:48,” <http://evangelicalarminians.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Abasciano.-A-Conversation-about-the-Translation-of-Acts-13.48.pdf>, accessed February 13, 2017.

³⁷ Forlines, 163-165.

about YHWH from the local synagogue, the main point in view here is that their hearts were prepared and disposed to receive the message in faith. The suggested translation “were disposed to eternal life” preserves the ambiguity of the original Greek middle/passive verb, rather than importing the idea of divine foreordination that is not explicitly present in the text.³⁸

Romans 8:29-30

²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. ³⁰And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Theologians often refer to this passage as the “Golden Chain” of salvation. It is the primary text of the doctrine of predestination, which is tightly coupled to election. Calvinists and Arminians both believe that predestination is a biblical doctrine, as the word is found in the text of Scripture. The point of contention lies in how predestination is defined and understood.

Foreknowledge

The dispute over interpreting this passage begins with the meaning of “foreknowing.” Arminians understand προγινώσκω (*proginōskō*) to simply mean that God knows what will take place in time before it actually happens. Because He has an eternal perspective from outside time, God knows what decisions people will make, including whether they will respond in faith when presented with the gospel message. While God foreknows both who will believe the gospel and who will reject it, Paul here is specifically referring only to those who respond in faith, as the second link in the chain will make clear.

Calvinists dismiss the simple foresight definition of foreknowledge. They point out that, in the Bible, knowing a person indicates having a relationship with that person, often in an

³⁸ Shank, 187.

intimate sense (Genesis 4:1 in older English translations speaks of Adam “knowing” Eve to refer to their conjugal relation). Since to know a person is to love that person, to foreknow him or her means to forelove him or her.³⁹ Rather than knowing facts about a person before that person exists, foreknowledge for the Calvinist means God sets His divine love on that individual from before creation. God then elects the individual, choosing him or her for salvation, based upon His pre-temporal decision to set His love upon that person.⁴⁰

There are only two occurrences of *proginōskō* in Paul’s writings, here and Romans 11:2. If Paul’s intended use of the word in 8:29 refers to a covenant love for each individual in the elect group from eternity past, placing them on the path to justification and glorification, this would cause problems in 11:2. There Paul is clearly speaking of ethnic Israel, of which a great number were unfaithful to the covenant and did not attain salvation.⁴¹

The only other time *proginōskō* appears in the New Testament is not in Paul’s letters, but does come from Paul’s lips. In Acts 26:5, Luke writes that Paul said, “προγινώσκοντές με ἄνωθεν,” literally “they are knowing me for a long time,” which the NIV renders as a perfect tense in English: “they have known me for a long time.” The idea is that Paul’s accusers are not just now meeting him, but have known him for some time before the point of Paul’s address to Agrippa; they have prior knowledge of him. And what did their prior knowledge consist of? They knew Paul’s manner of living in strict conformity to the Pharisaic sect of Judaism. It would seem, then, that when Paul speaks of foreknowledge, he is dealing with knowledge of facts and actions, not a “forelove” as some attempt to define the term.

³⁹ Storms, 103.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁴¹ Thornhill, *Chosen People*, 231.

Predestination

The next link in the chain is predestination. For the Arminian, predestination is concerned with what will happen to those who respond in faith to the gospel message, of which God in His omniscience knows beforehand. The outcome that God ordains for those who believe the good news is conformity to the image of Christ.⁴² The *telos*, or goal, is that believers would bear a family resemblance to the firstborn Brother in the family of God. Ambrose of Milan, the preacher under whom Augustine was converted, wrote, “He did not predestinate them before He knew them, but He did predestinate the reward of those whose merits He foreknew,” showing an understanding of predestination based on foreseen faith rather than an arbitrary decision.⁴³

In a Calvinist view, predestination is an extension of God’s distinguishing love by which He unconditionally elects certain people. It points to God’s decision concerning His intent for those He foreknew/foreloved.⁴⁴ Since God set his divine love on these individuals from eternity past, they *will* come to faith and conversion, a necessary step toward being conformed to Christ’s image. God loves them—chooses them for a relationship with himself—and He now irrevocably sets in motion their trajectory toward faith.

Concerning predestination, both systems see it as involving God’s goal or design for the ones He foreknew. However, the goal (conformity to Christ for Arminians, a faith response to Christ for Calvinists) differs because the starting point (foreseen faith or God’s arbitrary selection) differs.

Calling and Justification

⁴² Forlines, 171.

⁴³ Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition of the Christian Faith*, 294.

⁴⁴ Storms, 104.

Since determining exactly what Paul means by “calling” in this passage depends on the results of the call, calling and justification will be considered together together.

The word for “call” in verse 30 is the Greek verb καλέω (kaleō). This verb can express the concept of calling as summoning, or as naming. Some Arminians say the naming connotation should be used here, since almost all “calling” language in the New Testament refers to Christians. In this case, the “naming” aspect of calling would be God’s declaring that those He foreknew and predestined are His elect children, “giving them His family name.”⁴⁵ Other Arminians see it as a summons to faith. In this case, God has already foreseen the positive faith response of these persons, but that response can only occur if they hear preaching of the gospel message and a call to repentance (Rom. 10:14).

Calvinists speak of two different calls: an external, general call that goes out to all within earshot every time the gospel is proclaimed; and an internal, effective call.⁴⁶ The effective internal call only goes out to the foreloved elect who are predestined to salvation.

Calvinist scholar R. C. Sproul claims there exists a difficulty with the foreknowledge view of election, which proves fatal to the Arminian position. If God justifies all whom He calls, then one of two things is true: (1) all who hear the general outward call of public gospel preaching are justified; or (2) all to whom God extends the inner effective call are justified. “Since all who are called are justified and since not everyone is justified, then it follows that calling is a rather significant divine activity that some human beings receive and others do not.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Brian J. Abasciano, “Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:1-9: An Intertextual and Theological Exegesis” (PhD diss, University of Aberdeen, 2004), 336.

⁴⁶ R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God*, (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1994), 105.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 109.

If the naming sense of calling is what Paul has in mind here, there is no difficulty. God is simply calling those He foresaw would respond in faith His own, giving them the name “Christian.” They have already believed, which is the condition for being counted righteous through justification (Gal. 3:6). In this case, the call is not a step in the process preceding justification; foreknowledge, predestination, calling, justification, and glorification can all be seen as simply components of the package of salvation, rather than consecutive events.

If Paul is talking about a summons to respond to the gospel, there is still not an insurmountable difficulty as Sproul assumes. The chain of events starts with God foreknowing who will respond positively in faith. The rest of the chain (predestination, calling, justification, and glorification) only applies to those foreknown individuals. *Those God foreknew would believe* were predestined, called, justified, and glorified. Could there be other people who hear the call to repentance through gospel preaching, but who do not respond positively in faith? Certainly. Matthew 22:14 says, “Many are called, but few are chosen” (ESV). But those who reject the gospel do not impact this sequence, because they were already excluded at the first step due to foreseen unbelief.

Thus, neither Arminian position—the naming sense of calling or the summons sense—has a real difficulty. The Calvinist formulation of two calls, one internal and effective and one external and general, seems much more problematic, as it appears contrived to create definitions for the biblical terms that will fit into the presuppositions of their soteriological system.

Glorification

Paul uses the past tense, saying God “glorified” those he justified. This is puzzling to many, because glorification will not take place until Christ’s second coming, when He will transform “our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21). The most

common interpretation is that, while it is yet future, this glorification is certain for those whom God foreknew, predestined, called, and justified.⁴⁸ Calvinists and Arminians are in general agreement on this. Calvinists may object that Arminians cannot have a guarantee of future glorification, because Arminians hold that a true believer may apostatize and forfeit salvation. If an individual does that, such a person certainly will not achieve glorification. However, if one takes the word foreknown in verse 29 as referring not only to those God foresees as responding positively to the gospel message, but also those whose faith endures to the end, there is no difficulty.

Romans 9:6–24

⁶It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. ⁷Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." ⁸In other words, it is not the children by physical descent who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. ⁹For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." ¹⁰Not only that, but Rebekah's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac. ¹¹Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: ¹²not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." ¹³Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated." ¹⁴What then shall we say? Is God unjust? Not at all! ¹⁵For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." ¹⁶It does not, therefore, depend on human desire or effort, but on God's mercy. ¹⁷For Scripture says to Pharaoh: "I raised you up for this very purpose, that I might display my power in you and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth." ¹⁸Therefore God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden. ¹⁹One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?" ²⁰But who are you, a human being, to talk back to God? "Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'Why did you make me like this?'" ²¹Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use? ²²What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? ²³What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—²⁴even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

⁴⁸ Forlines, 149.

The ninth chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome is probably the text used most often to argue for unconditional, individual election to salvation of a particular number of persons.⁴⁹ It is also used to support the idea of double-predestination, where God not only actively chooses who will be saved, but selects everyone else to be damned.

In verse 6, Paul points out that not every physical descendent of Jacob/Israel is a true Israelite. Here, he seems to be arguing against the "national and unconditional" view of election held by some Jews of the Second Temple period. Jews with this approach to election believed that God did not elect just the nation of Israel *as a* nation, but each individual descendant of Abraham through Jacob.⁵⁰ The true descendants of Abraham are those who have the faith of Abraham (Gal. 3:7). Calvinists and Arminians are in agreement on this point.

Calvin saw verses 7–16 as contrasting Isaac and Jacob on the one hand with Ishmael and Esau on the other as examples of how "God's purpose in election" distinguishes between those whom God elects to save and those who simply belong to the ethnic people of Israel.⁵¹ Sproul points out Paul's emphasis of the fact that God announced His decision for the covenant line to proceed through Jacob before Rebekah gave birth. The fact that Paul adds, "or had done anything good or bad" makes it clear, for Sproul, that predestination is based on God without any consideration of a human being's future actions.⁵²

However, one must carefully observe what the text says, without assuming the presuppositions of a particular soteriology. The text does say Rebekah was told the older would serve the younger before she gave birth, and before either boy had done anything good or evil. It

⁴⁹ Cornelis P. Venema, "'Jacob I Loved, but Esau I Hated': Corporate or Individual Election in Paul's Argument in Romans 9?" *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 26 (2015), 7.

⁵⁰ Forlines, 103.

⁵¹ Venema, 11.

⁵² Sproul, 122-123.

does not say, though, that God did not take the twins' foreseen future actions into account. God's omniscience includes knowledge of all future human actions, without necessarily determining those actions. It is reasonable to believe that a God who does not look on the external appearance, but on the heart, would take into account future actions that would be pleasing or displeasing to Him. This text does not necessarily affirm or deny God's consideration of future acts. It only says that God made His declaration to Rebekah at a point in human time before those future actions were realized and could be considered by human beings.

Second Temple Jewish literature suggests many actions that would account for Esau being rejected as the son to continue the covenant line. According to *Testimony of Gad*, Esau used dishonesty to become wealthy. The *Testimony of Benjamin* has him committing fornication and idolatry. Genesis 28:6–8 says that Esau had married Canaanite women (also recorded in *Jubilees* 25:1; 27:8; and 29:18). In addition, *Jubilees* says that Esau was not chosen to carry on the covenant line because he was unrighteous and violent.⁵³

Even if one lays aside God's foreknowledge of Esau and Jacob's future actions, this passage does not teach that Jacob was saved and Esau was damned. It shows that God chose the younger twin, Jacob, to be the one through whose line the Messiah would come. This breaking of the cultural standard of primogeniture repeats what happened with Ishmael and Isaac, where the younger son was given preference over the firstborn. God is not bound by human cultural traditions when it comes to selecting individuals (or people groups) to be His agents. Also, in Deuteronomy 23:7, God tells His people not to despise an Edomite, because the people of Edom are related to Israel. This would be an odd command on God's part if His rejection of Esau

⁵³ Thornhill, *Chosen People*, 235.

entailed reprobation and the utter casting away of Esau and his heirs. The best conclusion is that the choice of Jacob over Esau was for the purpose of covenant leadership.⁵⁴

Verse 15, where God says to Moses, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,” is also used by some to argue for unconditional election, showing that God is free to choose to save whomever He desires to choose. Paul’s point here, though, is not that God shows mercy arbitrarily, but that human beings cannot compel God to be merciful, for no human being deserves mercy: it is purely a gift of God’s grace.⁵⁵ When one reads God’s statement that He will show mercy and compassion to whomever He chooses, one should ask: To whom has God decided to be merciful and compassionate? God has revealed that it is His will to show mercy and grant salvation to those who accept His free gift of grace offered in Jesus the Messiah. Since this plan of salvation was God’s idea from the beginning—not something human beings created in an effort to merit salvation—no one is forcing God to do things in this manner; He is simply being faithful to His own word of promise.⁵⁶

Some see God’s raising up Pharaoh as an example of reprobation. They would say that from creation, God purposed to turn Pharaoh over to unbelief, hardening his heart in order to continue accumulating sin to his account for the purposes of final judgment. However, Paul does not explicitly say, nor even imply, that God ever created a human being for the purpose of destroying him or her.⁵⁷ The ten plagues God sent against Egypt were not just punishments against Pharaoh and the Egyptian people for their refusal to let the Hebrews go free. Each plague

⁵⁴ Wayne A. Brindle, “Prepared by Whom?: Reprobation and Non-Calvinist Interpretations of Romans 9:22,” *Criswell Theological Review* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 136.

⁵⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 333.

⁵⁶ Forlines, 130.

⁵⁷ Brindle, 137.

dealt with a natural element or animal associated with Egyptian gods. Pharaoh's heart needed to be hardened into keeping the Israelites captive so that YHWH could complete His judgement against all the false gods of Egypt, demonstrating to Egypt—and to the larger ANE world—that He was Lord.⁵⁸

If Paul's discussion of Esau and Jacob serves Calvinists as a model for the idea of unconditional election, then the metaphor of the potter, the objects of wrath, and the objects of mercy serves as the main argument for the concept of reprobation in Romans. The idea of reprobation in this text centers around the phrase "fitted for destruction." The word used here is the perfect passive/middle participle of καταρτίζω (*kataridzō*). If Paul is using the passive voice, then the vessels of wrath are prepared for destruction by someone else, presumably God (if one takes it as a divine passive). If the verb is read as the middle voice, however, it becomes possible that the vessels—human beings in this case, rather than inanimate pieces of pottery without wills—prepare themselves for destruction through continual disobedience and refusal to repent. Paul is careful to explicitly state that God prepares the vessels of mercy for glory. He does not specify God as the agent preparing the vessels of wrath for destruction, leaving the door open for the middle voice to be the intended understanding.⁵⁹ Just as the Gentiles who believed in Acts 13:48 had made themselves fit for eternal life through prior positive responses toward God, the vessels of wrath here have prepared themselves for destruction through sustained rebellion.

Romans 11:17-24

¹⁷If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root,
¹⁸do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches. If you do, consider this:

⁵⁸ Craig S. Keener, *Romans: A New Covenant Commentary*, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 119.

⁵⁹ Brindle, 141-142.

You do not support the root, but the root supports you. ¹⁹You will say then, “Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in.” ²⁰Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but tremble. ²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. ²²Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. ²³And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. ²⁴After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

Paul uses the metaphor of an olive tree to represent the elect people of God, those who receive the blessings of the covenant. This illustration captures the corporate aspect of election perfectly, as it is the tree—the corporate body—that is primarily in view regarding the covenant promises and spiritual life. Individuals take part in these promises by participating in the group.⁶⁰ Paul says that some of the natural branches—ethnic Jews who were born into the nation of Israel—were broken off because of unbelief, and Gentiles were grafted in. The Jewish natural branches, however, may be grafted back in again if they abandon their unbelief.

Paul’s Greek term translated “unbelief” (vv. 20, 23) is ἀπιστία (*apistia*). Just as πίστις (*pistis*) can carry the dual sense of both faith and faithfulness, *apistia* can mean unfaithfulness as well as unbelief (or lack of faith). It was not a mere lack of cognitive belief that led to the natural branches being cut off, but their unfaithfulness in not adhering to the covenant. Paul warns that the wild branches, now grafted in, run the same risk of being cut off, signifying that those who have joined the elect through faith may yet be removed if they are unfaithful. If the natural branches abandon their unbelief/unfaithfulness, God will welcome them back and reconnect them to the spiritual life of God’s corporate people. This supports the idea that while God’s decision to have a people for himself is unconditional, individual membership and inclusion in the covenant people is conditioned on faith (and faithfulness to the covenant-making God).

⁶⁰ Abasciano, "Corporate Election in Romans 9," 362.

Ephesians 1:4–6

³Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. ⁴For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love ⁵he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—⁶to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. ⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace ⁸that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and understanding, ⁹he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, ¹⁰to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. ¹¹In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, ¹²in order that we, who were the first to put our hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. ¹³And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession—to the praise of his glory.

The beginning of Paul’s epistle to the church in Ephesus is the foundation passage concerning the doctrine of election for both soteriological systems.⁶¹ Paul’s concept of election here is thoroughly Christocentric. The phrases “in Christ,” “in Him,” and “in the One he loves” permeate this passage, occurring over a dozen times in eleven verses. Paul twice states (vv. 4, 11) that believers are chosen in Christ. The question that divides is whether God chose “us [who are] in Him” or chose “us [to be] in Him.” Is election based on belonging to the group that has put their faith in Christ and thereby been united with Him, or is election the deciding factor that causes a person to believe and thus become part of the corporate body of Christ?

It is important to remember that Paul makes frequent use of the concept of corporate representation in his letters. Adam was the corporate head of the human race whose sin affected all of humanity (Rom. 5:12). God’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob impacted not only their lives, but the lives of their descendants as well, even dozens of generations after them. Jews

⁶¹ Shank, 27.

counted on their relationship to Abraham, with whom God first made the covenant, as the basis of God's favor and blessing.⁶²

Some Calvinists say Paul describes election as occurring pre-temporally to emphasize that God's decision to elect is not affected by human actions.⁶³ However, it is more likely here that Paul is not referring to God electing each individual, but to His decision before creation to send His Son to be the Savior of the human race, whom He foreknew would rebel and be separated from their Creator. Christ is the chosen one, and believers are chosen on the basis of their relationship to Him. "In biblical thought, the corporate representative would be seen as embodying the people he represents from the beginning of his representative role, which is to say from the beginning of his election."⁶⁴ Since Christ was chosen before creation to be the Savior, it can be said that those who are joined to Christ by faith share in His eternal election. The idea of individual, unconditional election from eternity is not necessitated by the text.

Verse 3 indicates that the spiritual blessings believers enjoy are theirs *on the basis of* their status of being "in Christ"—being united with Him through faith. It naturally follows that the election mentioned in verse 4 would be a consequence of that union as well, since it is described with the parallel phrase "in Him." One can only ignore this if one holds theological presuppositions that require one to interpret these verses in an individualistic manner.⁶⁵

Thornhill points out that beginning with Ephesians 1:3, the only time the writer uses singular pronouns is in reference to God and Jesus. All the other pronouns through verse 12 are

⁶² Leslie James Crawford, "Ephesians 1:3-4 and the Nature of Election," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 84.

⁶³ Storms, 107.

⁶⁴ Brian J. Abasciano, "Clearing Up Misconceptions About Corporate Election," *Ashland Theological Journal* 41 (2009): 67.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

first-person-plural. Even when second-person pronouns first appear in verse 13, they are plural.⁶⁶ While these statistics alone are not conclusive proof, when combined with the fact that Ancient Near East cultures worked more from a collective mindset than an individual one, they build a solid case that Paul was thinking of election in corporate terms.

Revelation 13:8 and 17:8

^{13:8}All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the Lamb’s book of life, the Lamb who was slain from the creation of the world.

^{17:8}The beast, which you saw, once was, now is not, and yet will come up out of the Abyss and go to its destruction. The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast, because it once was, now is not, and yet will come.

Sam Storms writes, “It would seem, then, based on both Revelation 13:8 and 17:8, that everyone’s name either is or is not written in the Lamb’s book of life *before the world began, i.e., in eternity past.*”⁶⁷

For these two verses, it is necessary to look at multiple translations and compare them to the original Greek, as differences between translations can certainly predispose one to a certain interpretation. The English Standard Version renders 13:8 as “and all who dwell on earth will worship it, everyone whose name has not been written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.” Revelation 17:8 is translated “The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to rise from the bottomless pit and go to destruction. And the dwellers on earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the foundation of the world will marvel to see the beast, because it was and is not and is to come.”

⁶⁶ Thornhill, *Chosen People*, 180.

⁶⁷ Storms, 113.

The major difference is in 13:8. The NIV associates the phrase “from the creation of the world” with the slaying of the Lamb (as do the KJV, NKJV, MEV, and NLT). On the other hand, the ESV takes it to refer to when names were written in the book of life (in agreement with the CEB, CEV, HCSB, NASB, NET, NRSV; a marginal note in the NIV also gives the ESV’s placement of the phrase as an alternative). The relevant part of the verse in Greek reads: οὗ οὐ γέγραπται τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ βιβλίῳ τῆς ζωῆς τοῦ ἀρνίου τοῦ ἐσφαγμένου ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου, placing “from the foundation of the world” (ἀπὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου) after “the Lamb who was slain” (τοῦ ἀρνίου τοῦ ἐσφαγμένου). If one seeks to associate the prepositional phrase with the nearest verb it could modify—the participle “slain”—one would link it with the Lamb. But the construction in 17:8—which, other than omitting “of the Lamb who was slain” is identical to 13:8—leads some to associate “from the beginning of the world” with the writing of the names in the book, taking “of the Lamb who was slain” as simply a further description of the book of life.⁶⁸

The book of life is mentioned four other times in Revelation (3:5; 20:12, 15; 21:27), but none of these passages have a temporal phrase describing when names were inscribed in the book. They only mention that the book contains the names of those who will enter the New Jerusalem, and that those whose names are not in the book will receive punishment. Thus, these verses do not help further determine which rendering of 13:8 would best convey the revelator’s thought.

More significant than the different placement of the phrase in translations, however, is the translation of the preposition ἀπὸ (apo) itself. In 13:8, the ESV uses the English preposition “before” instead of “from” as the translation (as do the NLT and CEV), while the NIV, KJV,

⁶⁸ G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 702.

NKJV, MEV, CEB, HCSB, NASB, and NRSV all translate it as “from,” with the NET opting for “since.” However, in 17:8, the ESV utilizes “from” just as the NIV does. Ephesians 1:4, which also talks about events in relation to the creation of the world, as was seen earlier, uses the preposition *πρό* (*pro*) which *does* mean “before.” The phrase in Ephesians 1:4 sets a final temporal boundary for the action of the main verb, with the action occurring before that boundary. The preposition *apo* used in these two verses in Revelation never means “before” in Greek. On the contrary, Liddle and Scott list “after” as one of the meanings of *apo* when it is used to speak about time.⁶⁹ So the phrase is best translated “from the foundation of the world,” as in the NIV, “since the foundation of the world” (NET), or even “after the foundation of the world.” All of these translations reflect the sense of the Greek phrase, which sets a boundary on the beginning of the action under consideration, denoting the earliest time it could have occurred.⁷⁰

Even with the translation “from the foundation of the world,” the question remains: does John mean that believers’ names were written in the book of life as creation was taking place, and have remained there? Or does he mean the names have been written in the book of life during the period beginning from the world’s foundation, with each name inscribed as the person came to faith? The text does not clearly point in one direction or the other, but based on our previous observations concerning election in other passages, the latter seems more likely.

⁶⁹ H. G. Liddell, *A Lexicon: Abridged from Liddell and Scott’s Greek-English Lexicon*, (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), 94.

⁷⁰ Brian H. Wagner, “7 Reasons from Context and Grammar Showing Eph 1:4 Teaches Corporate Future Blessing...Not Divine Individual Election,” https://www.academia.edu/31113015/Ephesians_1_4_-_exegetical_dialog, accessed March 17, 2017.

UNDERSTANDING ELECTION

Entire chapters, if not books, could be written on each aspect of the doctrine of election and how they interact with and impact other specific doctrines of the Christian faith. This paper has barely scratched the surface. Based on the preceding survey of historical and textual data, however, the case will be made that corporate election is the primary view of the biblical writers, with individual participation in the corporate group being conditioned on obedient faith.

Corporate Election

In the Old Testament, the vast majority of references to election deal with the people of Israel as a corporate entity. Whenever election language is used in the Hebrew Scriptures to speak of individuals, the text is dealing with the selection of a king or another leader—such as Moses, Aaron, Joshua, or Isaiah—selected to perform a particular function or service.⁷¹ The same pattern carries over to the New Testament (e.g. the apostles in Luke 6:13; deacons in Acts 6:5; council delegates in Acts 15:22).⁷² Whenever Paul writes about election, it is concerning a group of persons; the only time he uses election language to refer to an individual is in his closing remarks to the church in Rome (Rom. 16:13), and here he is not referring to Rufus' salvation, but to his outstanding character as a Christian.⁷³

The metaphors the New Testament writers use to refer to God's chosen people—the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4; 1 Cor. 12:12-21; Eph. 3:6; 4:12, 15; 5:23; Col. 1:24; 3:15) and a temple (Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Pet 2:5)—point to the corporate nature of election. A body is a unit, but is made up of individual organs. A temple (or spiritual house) is one structure, but is comprised of

⁷¹ Ben Witherington III, *1 and 2 Thessalonians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 65.

⁷² Packer, "Election," 308.

⁷³ Abasciano, "Corporate Election in Romans 9," 356.

multiple stones. Likewise, the people of God are one entity made up of numerous individual believers. It is the establishment of a people for His name that God is carrying out in election.

Proponents of unconditional, individual election often object that, if God does not elect and predestine individual persons to salvation, then the possibility exists that there might not ever be anyone in the corporate group.⁷⁴ However, there is never any true risk of an “empty set” of the elect. First, God in His foreknowledge saw that people *would* respond in faith to the gospel message. Second, the fact that God first chooses the representative corporate head insures that the group of the elect is never empty.⁷⁵

Corporate election does not ignore the individual; individuals are included within the corporate group. However, the locus of election is the corporate head who defines the group. Without Abraham first being chosen, the chosen people of Israel would not exist; their identity was defined by their relationship to Abraham. Likewise, in the New Testament, Jesus Christ is the chosen one of God, with God’s people defined by their relationship to Him.

Conditional Individual Participation in the Elect

The existence of the corporately elected people of God as a group is unconditional. Jesus declared, “I will build my church, and the gates of hades will not overcome it” (Matt. 16:18). God will have a people for the glory of His name. Individual inclusion in the people of God, however, is conditional.

God chose Israel out of His free grace, in accordance with His plan to bring salvation to the world, and established a covenant first with Abraham, the corporate representative, and then with the nation as a people following the Exodus. However, if Israel failed to respond with

⁷⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner, “Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9: A Response to Brian Abasciano,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 49, no. 2 (June 2006): 378.

⁷⁵ Abasciano, “Clearing Up Misconceptions,” 64.

faithful adherence to the covenant, God could cast them off, either as a whole nation or the portion that proved unworthy.⁷⁶

In the Old Testament, inclusion in God’s people normally came through birth in the line of Jacob. However, people who had no genealogical relation to Abraham could join themselves to Israel through forsaking other gods, worshiping only YHWH, and adhering to the covenant stipulations He had established. Conversely, ethnic Jews who demonstrated unfaithfulness through worshiping foreign deities or violating the covenant in some other way were to be “cut off” from their people—removed from the elect nation—either through banishment or execution. When the nation sinned corporately, turning from YHWH to practice institutionalized idolatry, God eventually cut the people off from the land through exile—the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyria, and later the kingdom of Judah to Babylon. Those who were unfaithful caused their own removal from the elect nation, but God always had a remnant of faithful believers, however small it might be. Continued faithfulness determined which individuals were considered elect.

In the New Testament, election is no longer a matter of ethnic descent. All individuals become part of God’s elect people through personal response in faith to the gospel. Similar to the Old Testament, individuals can remove themselves from the elect through apostasy and willing unfaithfulness. One only obtains the promise of being presented holy and without blemish in God’s sight if he or she continues in the faith (Col. 1:23).⁷⁷

Calvinists object that conditional individual inclusion in the elect diminishes God’s sovereignty in salvation. Sam Storms writes, “An election that occurs only and always in response to a fulfilled condition is a matter of law, of debt, of obligation. If election is

⁷⁶ T. Rees, “Choose, Chosen,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, eds. J. Orr et al, (Chicago: The Howard-Severance Company, 1915), 613.

⁷⁷ Shank, 49.

conditional, God cannot will either to elect or not elect. If the condition is met, that is to say, if there is faith, God *must* elect.”⁷⁸ But God has already “willed to elect” when He established the condition. He is only “obligated to elect” in this case because God himself made the promise to save those who respond to the gospel message with faith in Christ. God does not lie, nor go back on His promises (Num. 23:19). Therefore, God is not so much obligated to those individuals who meet the condition and demonstrate faith, as He is to his own word and character. God’s sovereign control over salvation remains intact, because it was His divine initiative that created the possibility of a relationship between a holy God and fallen human beings in the first place.⁷⁹

CONCLUSION

While theologians and biblical scholars used to mark a sharp distinction between the Old and New Testaments, scholarship in recent decades has focused on the Jewish context of early Christianity and the influence of both the Old Testament and Second Temple period literature on the New Testament authors.⁸⁰ When one reads the Bible—not through the eyes of twenty-first century Westerners, nor those of sixteenth-century Reformers—but through the lenses of the writers’ context, they will actually find much more continuity than discontinuity.

While the Apostle Paul does strongly confront Jewish misconceptions and misinterpretations of the Hebrew Scriptures (in which many Jews mistakenly considered themselves “eternally in” based on their physical descent from Abraham), he does not throw away the Old Testament pattern. Paul uses Old Testament language to refer to the newly formed

⁷⁸ Storms, 84-85.

⁷⁹ Marshall, 442.

⁸⁰ Abasciano, “Clearing Up Misconceptions,” 59.

people of God. His most commonly used word is ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*, “church”) and is pulled directly from the Septuagint’s Greek translation of the Hebrew *qāhāl*, which usually denoted the congregation of Israel. “This abundant use of Old Testament ‘people’ language makes clear that Paul saw the church not only as in continuity with the old covenant people of God, but as the true succession of that people.”⁸¹

God chose Israel for a purpose. They were to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:6), serving as an example to the Gentile nations of what it looks like to know the one true God, and drawing those nations to reconciliation with the Creator. God’s purpose for His new covenant people in Christ is that they be a royal priesthood and a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9), ambassadors who carry God’s message of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18–20). Israel’s purpose was to *bring the Messiah* into the world; the church’s purpose is to take *the news that Messiah has come* into the world.

Rather than exchange the Old Testament concept of corporate election for a model of individual election to salvation, Paul, “like other Jewish writers of his day, understands ‘election’ to be about God’s people *as a people*.”⁸² Election is still corporate. Paul simply relocates the center of election. Instead of depending on blood ties to a physical ancestor, election now depends on a spiritual relationship to the chosen Messiah through His shed blood.

The idea of election as corporate, with individual participation in the elect group conditioned on faith, allows for the most straightforward reading of the biblical text. It avoids having to redefine foreknowledge, and does not necessitate creating two distinct wills of God (decretive and preceptive) that are not clearly defined in Scripture. Corporate election also

⁸¹ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul, the Spirit, and the People of God*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1996), 65.

⁸² Thornhill, *Chosen People*, 98.

maintains the most continuity between testaments, recognizing the whole of Scripture as one grand narrative with consistent themes.

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