



When God alters our fate: Relational freedom in Romans 5:1–11 and 8:18–39

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Abstract

Fate played an enormous role in the Ancient Mediterranean world. Fate was personified in numerous ancient deities such as the Keres, the Moirae, and Fortuna. At the same time Stoic views on fate, as a chain of causes, impacted hugely on the ancients' general view on fate as an inexorable force which cannot be opposed, or whose direction and eventual outcomes cannot be changed. Against the backdrop, Paul's understanding of the nature of God's presence, actions and influence in the lives of believers in Romans 5:1–10 and 8:18–39 is discussed. Fate, in the sense of that which has been predetermined and written into the lives of individuals before birth, and which comes into existence in many different, fixed forms, or fate as a chain of causes, is never on Paul's mind. God's foreordained plan is not a predetermined, unalterable fate for each and every person over which they have no control or say whatsoever. Rather, God's πρόθεσις (prothesis) relates to the salvation of all believers. God refuses to surrender his people to their fate, namely death and eternal destruction. He changes fate into destiny for all who believe in Christ.

Key words

Fate; destiny; relational freedom

1. Introduction: Fate here and now ... but also there and everywhere

Fate plays an enormous role in our world. The most popular slogan in religion and spirituality, as well as in the world of entertainment is that golden oldie: "everything happens for a reason." Other equally popular one-liners in similar vein include: "what will be will be (*que sera sera*)" "follow your destiny," and: "everything works out for the best."

In spite of the pervasiveness of fate in all cultures, it is seldom mentioned or discussed in intellectual conversations. “If one appeals to fate as explanation, it is often met with polite disregard” (Hastings 2008:3). No wonder this terrain has been largely surrendered to the likes of astrologists, fortune tellers, tarot card readers, new age prophets and fundamentalistic religious preachers. The risk of the abandonment of personal freedom is perhaps the main reason for the avoidance of serious discussions of fate in “respected” academic circles. It would seem rather primitive and naive to use fate to explain unresolved events and complex life questions. Still, “... the philosophy of fatalism has an ancient and respected path, of which the existing records pertaining to it permeate our scientific, spiritual, and mythological worlds” (Hastings 2008:4). In particular, the narratives, poems, statues and inscriptions of ancient Greco-Roman societies were filled with references to fate and its influence on people’s everyday life. At the same time fate was also personified in many deities.

Fate is a complicated, sometimes even contradictory notion. Any theological interest in fate has to take into account the various viewpoints and perspectives in the ancient Mediterranean world, as the socio-historical context within which the New Testament took shape. Within these cultures numerous beliefs were shared, combined, challenged and/or reiterated in terms of fate being predetermined or changeable, impersonal or personal, temporal or eternal. The basic components of the meta-narrative surrounding fate would probably include a generally shared understanding thereof as: (a) predetermined path, one that was designed or prescribed in the heavens; (b) one, which determined the major stages of people’s life (birth, marriage, death), as well as (c) their personal and social circumstances (illness/health, wealth/poverty, war/peace, good/bad conditions). On lower levels of abstraction more poignant questions arose in different socio-historical contexts regarding ancient Mediterranean people’s understanding of fate and the incorporation thereof in their respective worldviews, such as:

- Who or what determines one’s fate?
- Are the forms that fate will take on knowable and recognisable?
- Is fate an inexorable force which cannot be opposed, or whose direction and eventual outcomes cannot be changed?

- Does one's fate depend purely on chance?
- Can fate be created *à la*: "life is what you make of it," or: "every man is the architect of his fortune" (cf. also Sedakova 2014:7)?

Among early Christians fate was approached in different ways. One approach could probably be described as "divine omnicausality". Here the assumption would be that God causes every creaturely event that occurs and in this way exercises comprehensive control over the minutest aspects of his creatures' activities. Another option could be described as "molinism", according to which "... God would employ "middle knowledge" of what human beings would decide to do under any conceivable set of circumstances in order to control creaturely affairs without depriving human beings of libertarian freedom" (Jowers 2011:243). Another, more radical angle of incidence was to decipher whether Jesus Christ did "ultimately accommodate the individual within the cosmic economy, or did he prove that economy to be essentially flawed and contingent, the product of mere philosophical speculation?" (Denzey Lewis 2013:3).

Our aim in this study is not to go into all these approaches to fate. Rather, we shall endeavour to come to terms with Paul's understanding of the nature of God's presence, actions and influence in the lives of believers in Romans 5:1–10 and 8:18–39 against the backdrop of how the ancient Mediterraneans generally thought about fate. Our focus will be on Paul's "theo-logy". Linking on to Nils Alstrup Dahl's famous remark that "God is the neglected factor in New Testament theology" (1975:5), we plan to analyse Romans 5:1–10 and 8:18–39 in the light of "die Frage nach Gott im Römerbrief als selbständige Darstellung" (Flebbe 2008:9; cf. also Hurtado 2010; Carter 2016).

2. Fate personified in the Moirae, those dangerous *femmes fatales*

The image of the *femme fatale*, that seductive, mysterious woman who uses her charms and beauty to ensnare gods and men alike, is well-known in literature, films and plays. Throughout history such iconic figures as the Sirens, Helen of Troy, Eve, Delilah, Cleopatra, Mozart's Queen of the Night, Marie Antoinette, Camille, Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe and numerous other promiscuous *femmes fatales* have been forced into our

collective memory. Perhaps the most notorious of them all were the Greek goddesses of destiny, the so-called black Fates or *Keres*. According to Hesiod (*Theogony* 211) the goddess Nyx gave birth to hateful Moros as well as black Ker. Justice was definitely not the strong point of these Keres whenever they were personified, since they did not deal out fate with any kind of mercy or justice. They delighted in misfortune, destruction and death. Plagues and sickness were also their doing (cf. Hesiod, *Work and Days*, 90–92). The Keres did not live on Olympus but in the underworld, hence the reference to them as κήρες θανάτοιο (kêres thanatoio). They loved the presence of bloodshed so much that they attended every battlefield where they fought with their claws over the bodies of the dead warriors (*Il* 18.535–538).

Less threatening, but more powerful is *Moirai* whenever human destiny is at stake. Homer, in particular, rarely personifies fate, but opts to use *moira* as “... a common noun meaning anything from one’s lot in life (for example, *Il* 19.86–87) to a portion of food (*Od* 20.260) or one’s status (*Il* 15.209). The general idea of Fate is seemingly identified with the will of Zeus while simultaneously presented as a principle to which Zeus, like all beings, is subject. In both cases, however, Fate is an irrevocable divine fact” (Binder 2014:68). Therefore, Homer always prefers to speak of *moira* in the singular (except in *Iliad* 24.29 where μοῖραι [*moirai*] is used). At birth *moira* spins out the threads of people’s lives (*Il* 24.209) and directs their actions and behaviour according to the council of the gods (*Il* 5.613). Still, Zeus always has the final say. He decides the fate of all. Not only does Zeus weigh out people’s fate to them (*Il* 7.69; 22.209), but he can also intervene in order to save people from their allotted fate whenever he chooses to do so (*Od* 1.34; *Il* 9.411).¹

Personalised fate took on the shape of three *Moirai* (or *Parcae* in Roman mythology), namely Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos. Their Roman names were Nona, Decuma and Morta. In *The Shield of Herakles* (258ff) Atropos is identified by Hesiod as the oldest of the three and also the most important. Depicted as very old women, the *Moirai* decide the fate of each person at birth. Clotho holds a spindle and fastens the thread of each person.

1 Initially, in the *Iliad* at least, everything that happens is part and parcel of the foreordained purpose and intention of Zeus, thus “Homer’s apparent theodicy is grounded in the confidence that all that happens is willed by Zeus, even when fate seems to be cheated” (Garrison 2000:36).

Lachesis measures their lifespan and continues to spin it until that fatal hour when Atropos steps in and cuts their life-thread. Since the Moirae determined individuals' fate, they also knew the future and were often seen as prophetic deities in the presence of Eleithyia (the Minoan goddess of childbirth), as well as Death (Il 3.101).

The Moirae were so powerful that the other gods were subject to their power and fate. Herodotus (*Hist* 1.91) tells us that the gods feared them because they had to conform to their punishment (Hesiod, *Theogony* 221–225). Only Zeus was close to the Moirae. In one inscription he is called Moiragetēs, the Guide/Father of the Moirae (Pausanias, v.15.5). Pindar (5) tells us that they sit the closest of all the gods to the throne of Zeus. The Moirae are independent in their actions. They stand at the helm of necessity, direct fate, and also ensure that fate is assigned to every being and that eternal laws take their course without obstruction. The duration of human life is in their hands.

3. Fortuna: When *virtus* is superseded by fate

Even more famous than the Moirae is the goddess Fortuna. As one of the most popular goddesses of the Romans, she has a long history. Good luck and chance were some of the meanings evoked in contexts where the goddess Fortuna was present. Together with her Greek counterpart Tychē, (who was worshipped mainly in Athens as the source of unexpected events in life, both good and evil), she was well-known across the Mediterranean world. Especially in Preneste, Italy, the worship of Fortuna “was so deeply entrenched that from this city alone we have more epigraphic evidence for it than from the rest of Italy put together, including Rome” (Miano, 2018:14). The temple of Fortuna Primigenia, as protector of the city, attracted throngs of people from all across the Mediterranean world, including Roman consuls, Hellenistic kings, professionals, freedmen and slaves. Epigraphic and iconographic evidence reflecting her presence date back to the early fourth century BC. She was also worshipped in Rome in three temples inside the city at the Quirinal Hill (which gave the hill the name *tres fortunae*), as Firstborn Fortuna of the Romans, Public Fortune, and as Fortune of the State. However, the way in which Fortuna has been conceived over the centuries has changed according to people's needs and preferences (Billington 1999:129).

Although Fortuna (or Fors as she was originally known from the sixth century BC) was seen as the goddess who brought good fortune and fame to the Romans, ancient authors seldom has anything good to say of her (apart perhaps from Plutarch [*de Fortuna Romanorum*]). While Cicero associated Fortuna with *temeritas* or accident, Plautus connected her with *opportunitas*. Ennius (*Ann* 9.10) describes Fortuna as an indiscriminate force who even punished those who do not deserve it. Pacuvius agreed, depicting Fortuna as senseless, blind and unpredictable (cf. Baynham 1998:106–7). Because she was governed by *fors* (chance), she is a personified entity whose power one can do little about. This is why the Roman historian Sallust (*Bell. Cat* 8.1) was convinced that Fortuna holds sway over all matters. She does not produce *virtus*. However, he believed *virtus* could overcome the changes Fortuna might cause to happen. Still, in the eyes of ordinary Romans “she helped build the empire, questioning her benevolence would have been undesirable” (Miano 2018:200). Plutarch (*De Fortuna Romanorum* – Mor 4.316) was convinced that Rome and its occupants owed more to Fortuna than to *virtus*. Numerous Romans and its emperors experienced good fortune because of her. Fortuna’s enduring importance in Roman life is vividly captured in the remark of Peter Walsh (quoted in Billington 199:130): “She alone in all places and at all times is invoked, praised and blamed.”

4. Fate as a string of causes for the Stoics

Within the framework of Stoicism, the popular philosophy that flourished in the ancient Mediterranean world for many centuries, and which was also well-known to Paul (cf. Garcilazo 2007:1–10), the concept of fate (εἰμαρμένῃ [*heimarmenē*]) was frequently reflected on. Zeno, its founder, understood fate as “the chainlike cause of existing things of the logos according to which they are ordered,” and as “the moving power of matter in the same way, which does not differ from providence and nature” (Drozdek 2007:237). Cleanthes of Assos, the successor of Zeno, in a hymn to Zeus, associated him directly with fate (Garcilazo 2007:17). Since fate is ubiquitous and affects everything, the Stoics concluded that all things happen according to fate (cf. Cicero, *De di* 1.125–127). Within the confines of such a rigidly determined reality with no room for any “uncaused cause”, Cleanthes developed the concept of providence or πρόνοια ([*pronoia*] providence, or

God's will). Still, according to Chrysippus, "nothing takes place or moves in the least differently than according to the logos of Zeus, which he says is the same as fate" (Plutarch, SR 1056). Hence the Stoic logic that God is fate, and vice versa! Fate, being a string of causes (εἰρμὸν αἰτιῶν [heirmon aitiōn]) that is an inviolable order and binding together (Aetius *Plac.* 1.28), allows for the connection of cause to cause that generates things from itself (Cic *Div* 1.125). Since the divine logos permeates the entire cosmos as a corporeal breath or pneuma, it is the very nature of this φύσις which is responsible for all growth and development.

According to Meyer (2009:79): "Causes of this sort are σπερματικοί (spermatikoi) or "seminal" *logoi* – so called because their effects typically unfold in an orderly sequence of events. This sequence of events, however, is not one of cause and effect, on the Stoic paradigm. Rather, the entire sequence of events is the effect, while the cause is the nature or soul that persists through the sequence. A cause, so conceived, is not succeeded by its effects, but exists simultaneously with them." A cause which would initiate a sequence but did not determine its course would be called a "procatartctic" or "initiatory cause" by the Stoics. Causes that determine completely the character of their effects would again be called "autolē" (being complete in themselves). This is how some Stoics tried to reconcile free will and fate.²

5. When God alters our fate: Excursions into Romans 5:1–11 and Romans 8:18–39

Although Paul does not engage in any explicit discussions on the topic of fate or the role of the Graeco-Roman gods in this regard, his letters echo a constant awareness of this problem. In terms of Paul's cosmography, his own take on causality and ἐλευθερία (eleutheria) or freedom in terms of the cosmic power of sin on the one hand, and the cross of Christ on the other hand, at least point to the fact that ideas pertaining to fate formed part of

2 "It is the essence – namely the causal sequence – of the physical world as the Stoics understood it. In addition to identifying fate (physical discourse) with Zeus (personal discourse), they also ascribed 'providence' (that is, cognitive discourse) to Zeus, taking it that God's providence was operative through fate, which they even called 'the mind of God' But not only that: the Stoics also identified fate with the goddess Moira, who was of course the traditional goddess of 'Fate.' For –as they said– 'everybody prays to Moira as goddess'" (Engberg-Pedersen, 2010:81; cf. also Croasmun 2017).

the fabric or weave of the world which he also inhabited. It would seem, however, that Paul and philosophers such as the Stoics are independent of one another on this point. “In fact, despite superficial resemblances, they are in main opposition. While for Paul freedom is based in the grace of God and charismatic in nature, it is grounded in philosophy and the result of education in the Stoics” (Weiss, in Longenecker 2015:145). While Stoics expect an anthropocentric surrender to the inner law of one’s being, Paul’s focus is Christo-centric.³ Freedom is only to be found in the surrender of one’s life to Christ as Lord. Although Paul knows of (personified) powers, influences and forces that impede on human freedom, he also knows that those who are in Christ are not condemned to fate. In order to explore the nature of this freedom within the framework of Paul’s understanding of God’s relational involvement in the lives of people, as his “answer” to the problem of predetermined fate, we shall briefly focus on two sections in Romans 5–8, namely Romans 5:1–10 and Romans 8:18–39.⁴

5.1 Romans 5:1–10

5.1.1 Sin is the destructive force that severs us from God’s relational presence

Sin is the enemy that robs people from their freedom before God, as well as from their creaturely goodness (Rom 1:16–31). Well-aware of this dehumanizing power of sin, Paul “universalises” its presence in the Book of Romans.⁵ It is clear to him that “die Sünde von ausserhalb der Welt, in den Welt gekommen ist’, d.h. von Paulus als eine trans-individuelle kosmische Macht verstanden wird” (Schnelle 2017:208–9). He also knows that this destructive force attaches itself to everything and everyone, hence his well-known statement in Romans 3:9 that Jews and Greeks alike are under the power of sin. Although sin dominates the present evil age (Gal 1:4), Paul

3 Huttunen finds more Stoic components in Pauline thought than other scholars would admit. More to the point: “Paul’s reasoning is not pure Stoicism but rather a Christian adaptation of it” (2010:46).

4 “Die deutliche thematische und sprachliche Korrespondenz zwischen Röm 5,1–11 und 8,18–39 sprechen nach wie vor für die These eine ‚Ringskomposition’” (Schnelle 2017:217).

5 Paul knows that “durch Adam kamen die Sünde und damit der Tod in die Welt (Röm 5,12a,b)” (Schnelle 2003:361). The majority of Paul’s references to sin are found in Rm 5:12–8:11 where he uses the singular ἀμαρτία (hamartia) 41 times, “personifying sin and making it the subject of its own actions” (Carter 2001:3; cf. also Mohrlang 2013:35).

does not see sin only as “a disembodied power acting on its own ... sin always acts in and through sinners. Where there is one, there is the other” (Nelson 2011:33). At the same time, Paul is not of opinion that everything conforms to fate because of sin, or that everything takes place by means of antecedent causes because of its presence. People still have different propensities and choices. Neither does Paul believe that everything that happens is predestined or necessary. Put differently, sin does not cause people to be fated to act according to unalterable, predetermined causes into the smallest details of their lives. Notwithstanding, Paul is aware of the power of sin as an all-pervasive force that decisively affects the nature, character and behaviour of all before God. The real enslavement in Paul’s view is not to a predetermined, unalterable fate, but an enslavement to a hostile cosmic force that leads to disobedience to God’s law, as well as to idolatry and immoral behaviour (Rm 1:16–3:20). On their own people have no inherent ability to effectively curb the destructive power of sin that separates all from God. Their eternal lot is sealed by sin, because it imposes specific parameters on people’s freedom and the eventual course of their lives.

Paul describes the effects of sin in terms of the general human identity and status before God in strong terms in Romans 5:6–10. In 5:6 he states that sin renders us all helpless (ἀσθενεῖς [astheneis]) before Him. It also makes us ungodly in his eyes (ἀσεβεῖς [asebeis] – 5:6). At the same time, sin reduces our status to that of sinners before God (ἁμαρτωλοὶ [hamartōloi] – 5:8). Finally, it also turns us into enemies of God (ἐχθροί [egthroi] – 5:10). In other words, sin robs us from our freedom before God because it predisposes us to transgress his laws. In spite of the hopelessness of our sinful condition, Paul also knows that God’s intervened at precisely the right time (ἐν κατὰ καιρὸν [eti kata kairon] – 5:6) to change our status from sinners into people who are at peace with him (5:1).

5.1.2. God breaks the deadly grip of sin

Although sin seems to be an inexorable force, God does in fact alter its effects on our status before him through the death of Christ (which is referred to three times in 5:6–11). God refuses to accept the “necessity” of humanity’s eternal fate, which is forced upon all because of the presence of sin. Christ is God’s embodied response to the impersonal power of sin. He is God with flesh on. In Him and through Him God reconciles people

to himself. More to the point, the death of Christ on the cross is God's decisive intervention in the world to set people free. Here Jesus dies in our place to remove our hostility to God as well as his hostility to us. Here the reign of sin that severs the temporary and eternal relationship between God and us is interrupted. In this way God brings an end both to the eternal effects of sin, as well as to its power here and now that renders us helpless in terms of maintaining a sustained, righteous relationship with him. At the cross our fate is twisted. In this sense: "Die Sünde ist dann als Anlass des Evangeliums zu verstehen, das selbst das Ergebnis der Liebe Gottes darstellt (vgl Röm 5:8–9). Abgesehen davon besteht für den Menschen keine andere Möglichkeit das Heil zu erlangen" (Lyu 2013:147).

The cross of Christ, as God's gift of salvation to his enemies, is more than just a victory over the power of sin. The cross is nothing less than a revelation of his own nature as a God. Since God's nature is love (ἀγάπη [agapē] – 5:8), he actively demonstrates his selfless love for us by saving us from our eternal fate, namely ἡ ὀργή ([hē orgē] "the divine wrath" – 5:9). He did this when we were still helpless, ungodly, sinners and enemies. "Am Tod Christi für die Sünder, die Gottlosen, wird Gottes Liebe zu den Menschen erkennbar. Sie ist nicht anderes als sein Erbarmen, das eine 'creatio ex nihilo' bewirkt" (Gaukesbrink 1999:127). At the cross of Jesus God forges a new relationship with us, one that entails us being made righteous in his presence (δικαιωθέντες νῦν – [dikaiōthentes nun] – 5:9), as well as being reconciled with him (κατηλλάγημεν τῷ θεῷ [katēllagēmen tō theō] – 5:10). More correctly, God justifies us through the death of Jesus on the cross (ἐν τῷ αἵματι αὐτοῦ [en tō haimati autou] – 5:9), which results in us being reconciled with him. In the words of 5:11 the temporal and eternal grip of sin is now broken because we have received our reconciliation through our Lord Jesus Christ. The opposing cosmic powers in the world cannot separate us from God's love any longer (cf. 8:38–39). Therefore, we have the firm assurance that in the future Jesus will also save us from God's wrath (5:9) in his own person (ἐν τῇ ζωῇ αὐτοῦ [en tē zōē autou] – 5:10).

5.1.3. Set free to grow amid suffering

Believers are now at peace with God (5:1). They are no longer tied to their sinful existence with the chains of fate which previously forced them into an existence of compulsion and slavery. Their sinful past no longer predicts their future, since God has finally set them free. Their initial

fate has been conquered and forever altered. God is the architect and inaugurator of their new existence, one that is defined by freedom. This freedom is relational. It entails freedom from guilt and fear in the presence of God. Now believers are “under no compulsion to sin, but for the first time given true freedom of choice and power to ‘walk in the newness of life’” (Longenecker 2015:156–7)

Christian freedom for Paul does not exclude freedom from suffering and hardship. As a matter of fact, the road to glory has a cruciform shape, as Gorman (2004:365) tells us: “it includes, or will include ‘sufferings.’” Hardship is not understood by Paul as punishment for sin. Neither is it divinely predetermined in order to facilitate spiritual growth; it is a basic fact of life. Believers suffer because of the continued presence of sin in the world. They are still living in a two-sided world: “auf der einen Seite die heilvolle Gegenwart des neuen Seins als Glaube, Liebe und Hoffnung in der Kraft des Geistes (5.1–110, auf der anderen Seite die Sünde als kosmische Gegenspielerin Christi, die zwar grundsätzlich entmachtet ist, dennoch weiterhin wirkt (Röm 5:12–21)” (Schnelle 2017:217). For believers, however, there is purpose in suffering or *θλιψις* ([*thlipsis*] 5:3–5). It produces endurance (*ὑπομονή* [*hupomonē*]), which, in turn, leads to moral character formation (*δοκιμή* [*dokimē*]). Along this causal chain, initiated by suffering, the ultimate freedom that believers need to grow into is hope (*ἐλπίς* [*elpis*]). This hope will never bring shame on them in God’s presence because they confidently know that their suffering will inevitably lead to moral character growth (as the double usage of *καυχάομαι* [*kauchaomai*] in 5:2–3, and the emphasis on knowing [*οἶδα* – *oida*] in 5:3 emphasize). Even more, hope will endure because God has poured out his love in believers through the Holy Spirit, as the divine “enabler” of hope (5:5).

While Stoics believe that people should live in accordance with the right reason or Logos as the governing principle of all things,⁶ Paul is convinced that God’s active presence is the reason why believers have the freedom to grow morally amid their suffering. While Seneca stresses the necessity of choosing a specific path of virtue (...as the gods lend you a hand and open doors to you as you progress on the path of virtue – *De vita beata* 24.3),

6 This Logos may be called Zeus, or Providence, or Destiny (Beare, quoted in Garcilazo 2007:20).

Paul knows that character growth takes place along the route of ὑπομονή (hupomonē), δοκιμή (dokimē) and ἐλπίς (elpis) and through believers' participation in the work of God's Spirit. God produces what he demands. The presence of his Spirit brings freedom from the bondage of sin and character growth in the face of suffering. Believers are thus propelled by an inner necessity (that is, the love of God and the presence of the Spirit) towards the growth that God desires. Hence, Paul's extreme confidence in God's goodness (5:3c; 11d).

5.2. Romans 8:18–39

5.2.1. *When all things work together for the moral good of believers*

Romans 8:18–39 functions as the conclusion of Paul's discussion of believers' new life in 5:1–8:39. In 8:18–25 he points out that the suffering of the present time cannot derail the glory (8:18) or the glorious liberty of the children of God (8:21) that will soon be revealed. Amid the continued groaning of creation and believers alike (who now share the ἀπαρχή τοῦ πνεύματος [apargē tou pneumatōs], the first-fruits of the Spirit), the final revelation of the sonship of God (υἰοθεσία [huiiothesia]) and the redemption of the body (τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν τοῦ σώματος ἡμῶν [tēn apolutrōsin tou sōmatos hēmōn] – 8:23) still awaits. For this hope believers have been saved (8:24–25).

In the meantime, the Spirit is at hand to intercede on their behalf. He does this in God's presence with inexpressible groans (στεναγμοῖς ἀλαλήτοις [stenagmois alalētois] 8:26), which recalls the συστενάζει (sustenazei) of creation in 8:22, and the στενάζομεν (stenazomen) of believers in 8:23. The joining of the Spirit in this groaning assures believers of his active involvement in their struggles (cf. Wu 2015:153). More to the point, the Spirit assists them in their ἀσθενεία ([astheneia] 8:26), which is explicitly linked to them not knowing what or how to pray. Even in their prayers they are dependent on God's help! Fortunately, the inexpressible groanings of the Spirit overrides theirs. Since God knows the intentions of the Spirit (8:27), he also knows that the Spirit's intercessions for the ἅγιοι (hagioi) will be according to his will. Therefore, he responds to the fervent intercession of the Spirit by using everything in believers' lives, including the suffering they must undergo, towards his own saving purpose. In the words of Keener (2009:107): "The Spirit works within believers during their sufferings to prepare them for conformity with the image of the crucified and resurrected Christ (8:28–29), i.e., to share his glory (8:30)."

As part of his elaboration on the nature of God interventions in the lives of believers, Paul makes a bold statement in 8:28: “we know that all things work together for good to them who love him).⁷ Πάντα ([panta] “everything”) relates to the sufferings of the present time (8:18), including believers’ inward groaning and weakness (8:23, 26). Believers may indeed know that “everything” works together for their good (εἰς ἀγαθόν [eis agathon]), but not in the sense of personal convenience or selfish comfort. This ἀγαθός (agathos), as the expected outcome of all things working together, should not be understood as a *carte blanche* reference to God’s micro-management of all possible circumstances in individuals’ lives to their personal benefit. It rather refers to the eschatological glory that awaits believers when salvation is completed.

At the same time, within the context of 8:18–39, ἀγαθός [agathos] also refers to the moral character formation of believers on their way to God’s eternal presence. But this “moral good” should not be understood in a deterministic sense, in the sense of it resulting from the passing of divinely scripted tests in order to forge the necessary spiritual growth. More to the point, and contrary to Moo (2002:140), Paul is definitely not saying that God allows bad things to happen in his children’s lives “...in order to create the ‘good’ of a deeper commitment to Him.”⁸

5.2.2. No competition with Fate, fate, or the fates

Romans 8:28 remains one of the most discussed, yet frequently misunderstood texts in Paul. One of the reasons for its theological popularity is probably because: “Romans 8:28–30 is the first place in the letter where ‘foreknow’ (proginōskō) is used and the only place in the letter where the verb ‘predestine’ (proorizō) is used. It represents a bird’s-eye view of what happens within the process of salvation according to Reasoner (2005:85). But to be fair, Paul is not so much interested in the various ‘steps’ involved in the process of salvation as a goal in itself, as in God’s involvement in believers’ lives to fulfil his own purpose or πρόθεσις (prothesis). Wu (2015:155) correctly points out that the presence of the

7 God is not the subject of πάντα (panta) here. It is possible grammatically that the subject is πάντα (panta), taking it to be the neuter of πᾶν (pan).

8 Moo (2002:140) goes so far to say God might allow us to lose a good job, or he might “allow us to suffer a physical disability in a car accident so that we can learn to depend on Him more than ever.”

terms πρόθεσις (prothesis), προορίζω (proorizō), κλητός, (klētos) and καλέω (kaleō) here in 8:28–30 indicate “that God’s purpose for those who are called is an important theme in the subunit... More specifically the pericope is about God’s purpose in glorifying his children via their faithful identification with Christ’s suffering.” Still, numerous theologians throughout the centuries chose to look at 8:28–30 through the lens of the predestination of individual believers based on God’s providence as the determinative factor in the attainment of salvation. Moving away from Paul’s assumption that faith is based in the call of God (not on individuals’ merits), the debate on divine foreknowledge versus human freedom that soon surfaced in the church (as the new “Christianized” take on fate!), turned Romans 8:28–30 into a theological battleground of sorts.

Paul knows that God does not unilaterally orchestrate all possible circumstances along the lines of a Zeus, the Moirae or Fortuna in order to attain predetermined “good” outcomes. Such a view would turn 8:28 into a deterministic divine statement of purpose, one that covers any situation and every contingency (as Morgan 2010: 9 thinks).⁹ When Romans 8:28–30 is understood from the perspective that all things are orchestrated by God in terms of interconnected causes that must lead to good outcomes, we are also not too far away from the Stoic understanding of fate as a string of events, caused by cosmic sympathy positing a complex set of relations of mutual influence between various bodies in the cosmos (Meyer 2009:73). Paul’s focus is different. Over against the Stoics, who think that the logos of a body is the cause of its activities, and which is again influenced by an antecedent cause of an external body, Paul focuses on the purposeful formation of believers’ character to be more Christ-like.

God’s purpose for believers is to be similar to the likeness of his Son (8:29b). Therefore, according to his foreknowledge (προγινώσκω [proginōskō] – 8:29a), God decided beforehand (cf. προορίζω [proorizō] – v. 29b, 30a) that believers would conform to Jesus as their new moral

9 Adherents of this type of understanding, according to which “everything happens for a reason,” often link it to believers’ limited present knowledge of God’s will, maintaining that we shall only understand later how everything worked together for the greater good. It is easy too see how this view can easily become conflated with determinism, where everything is decided beforehand by God and is simply working itself out in the course of time.

standard. God's plan is for Jesus to be the uniquely pre-eminent One, the πρωτότοκος (prōtotokos), among the many brethren (8:30c). In order to achieve this purpose, God follows a clearly chartered route starting with his effective calling of believers, as the ones who are within the range of his foreknowledge and prior decision. This is followed by his conferring of the status of righteousness upon all believers, followed by their corporate glorification. In this manner believers' initial fate, namely slavery to sin and eternal death, is altered into a new destiny. Although all believers' glorification still awaits in the future as foreordained by God (8:29), this process has already begun (as the suggestive use of the aorist ἐδόξασεν [edoksasen] suggests)

5.2.3. *In the presence of the God of ἀγάπη (agapē)*

The similarity between the language and content of Romans 8:31–39 and Romans 5:1–11 is staggering. In 8:31–39 "... we hear again, as in 5:1–11, of the love of God in Christ for us and the assurance that that brings to us; of the certainty of final vindication because of the justifying verdict of God; and of how these great forces render ultimately impotent and unimportant the tribulations of this life" (Moo 1996:538). The purpose of 8:31–39 is to offer a definitive answer to the question whether God somehow seeks believers' harm. No! "God is for us, *pro nobis*. No matter what comes, God's love, Christ's love, is certain" (Gorman 2004:375). Present suffering in no way suggests that God will ever give up on his people. The fact that he is for us (8:31b) is more fully explained by means of a rhetorical question in verse 32: if God did not spare his own Son, how will he not give us all things (τὰ πάντα [ta panta]) with Christ? Just as in 8:28, "all things' here refer to all that is necessary for salvation. Paul's question in 8:31c: τίς καθ' ἡμῶν ([tis kath hemōn] "who can be against us?") is also explained in 8:33–34: God is the one who justifies his elect. No-one can condemn believers in front of his throne, since the risen Christ is there, interceding on behalf of all believers.

In 8:35–39 Paul explains that literally nothing in creation can separate believers from the love of Christ (8:35) and the love of God (8:39). God's relational love is never-ending; it is never under threat. Nothing and no-one can sever believers from God's loving presence and his saving purpose in Christ. Every possible threat to their faith, including existential suffering caused by cruel external circumstances (8:35b), or the presence

of personal and impersonal spiritual and cosmic forces of any sort in any spatial location (8:38a–39b), can be withstood. In all these things believers are “hyper-conquerors” (8:37a). Other than the Stoic attitude to conquer “suffering ... by recognizing its inability to affect the true inner self, Paul’s attitude was that those in Christ ‘hyper-conquer’ in the midst of suffering because they know God’s love and possess a sure hope as they suffer with Christ” (Gorman 2004:378).

6. God changes fate to destiny

It is clear from our brief excursion into Romans 5:1–11 and 8:18–30 that Paul speaks of God “... as the God who reveals himself, not as a hidden God whose will and ways are inscrutable and whose hidden counsels might actually be the opposite of his revealed Word” (Witherington 2004:232). The gracious involvement of God in the lives of all his children is a given for Paul. As a matter of fact, he knows that God decided in advance that believers should be fully conformed to the image of Christ, but also that nothing or no-one should ever sever them from his love. Unilateral divine ἀγάπη, in other words! God’s selfless love for sinners who are fated to die and spend eternity under his wrath (5:8), is changed into a new destiny according to his gracious πρόθεσις (prothesis).

Fate, in the sense of that which has been predetermined and written into the lives of individuals before birth, and which comes into existence in many different, predetermined forms, or fate as a chain of causes, is never on Paul’s mind. God’s foreordained plan is not a predetermined, unalterable fate for each and every person over which they have no control or say whatsoever. God’s πρόθεσις (prothesis) relates to the salvation of all believers. God refuses to surrender his people to their fate, namely death and eternal destruction. He changes fate into destiny for all who believe in Christ. Therefore, God’s plan, his election, is a corporate matter. Paul’s point is definitely not to claim “... that certain individuals, rather than others, have been predestined to salvation, but to identify the scope, purpose, and dependability of God’s call in Christ” (Gorman 20:377). All those who are loved by God (8:29–30) are the ones who are now already fulfilling his purpose.

God is so very different from Graeco-Roman deities such as the Moirae and Zeus who pull the strings one-sidedly and who cut the cords whenever they wish. Paul offers a fresh view of a relational, loving God in a harsh religious environment where people are delivered up to the whims of mischievous deities such as the Keres, or unpredictable Fortuna. In a world ruled by such deterministic, impersonal and personalised forms of fate, Paul knows that God's *πρόθεσις* involves peace and freedom. His presence is deeply relational. For those who enter into this relationship with God by faith, the fatal bonds of death, controlled in the minds of numerous ancient Mediterraneans by the Keres, are broken, and blindfolded Fortuna's unpredictability is absent. Paul's *εὐαγγέλιον* ([euaggelion] – cf. Rm 2:16), is simple and clear: the cross of Christ brings reconciliation between God and all who believe. There is no unseen hand of fate in the details of God's loving relationship with, or his destiny for his children. As a matter of fact, their fate has been twisted by God!

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