

“ELECTION – NEW TESTAMENT”

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Election in the NT is understood as God’s selection in the distant past of those (whether angels or human beings) who will form the eschatological community of the holy. It is also God’s choice of those who will serve him in special ways.

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A. Terminology

A range of terms is used in the NT to describe divine election. Common are *eklogē* (“election”) and *eklektos* (“elect,” it denotes being the object of God’s choice, except for Rom 16:13); there are also *eklegomai* (“to choose”), *suneklektos* (“likewise chosen,” only in 1 Pet 5:13). Three verbs which are used one time each for election are *hairetizō* (“to choose,” in Matt 12:18), *haireō* (“to choose,” in 2 Thess 2:13), and *tassō* (“to ordain,” in Acts 13:48).

B. God’s Choice of Individuals for Special Service

There are a handful of NT references of God choosing an individual for a particular ministry. This choice for ministry has a rich OT background; God would show his choice for leaders (Num 16:5; Hag 2:23), priests (Deut 18:5; 21:15), kings (1 Sam 15:28), and prophets (Jer 1:5).

The apostle Paul had a firm sense of God’s choice of him to be the apostle to the gentiles (Acts 9:15; 13:47).

C. Jesus as the Elect Servant

According to the NT, Jesus was chosen to fulfill the divine plan, that the Messiah would suffer and die, rise again, and rule over creation (e.g., see Acts 3:20; Eph 1:9–10; 1 Pet 1:20; Rev 13:8). 1 Peter 2:4 refers to Christ as the Stone rejected by men, but “in God’s sight chosen and precious.” Some manuscripts of the Gospels refer to Christ as the “Chosen One” (*eklektos*) in connection with God’s approval of him as the “beloved Son” (in John 1:34 and Luke 9:35); this change probably reflects the link between election and the language of kingship in the early Church. Jesus’ taunters accused him of claiming to be “the Christ of God, his Chosen One” according to Luke 23:35.

The title derives either directly from the servant passages of Isaiah 41–42 or indirectly through other sources, such as the *Similitudes of Enoch*, in *1 En.* 39:6 and 48:6, one who is variously called the Son of Man and the Righteous One is also designated the Elect One.¹ The work plainly reflects traditional terminology, regardless of the possible Christian theological influence.

It is more likely that the Chosen Servant motif stems directly from Isaiah. The Servant Songs contain language of election and calling when speaking of the Servant Israel and of an individual servant (cf. Isa 41:8–9 with Isa 42:1). Matthew 12:18 contains the Christian paraphrase of Isa 42:1: “This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: ‘Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.’” The early Church read the Servant Songs as predictions of Jesus (Cullmann 1963: 51–82); their conviction that God had ordained him as the servant is found in Matt 8:17; Isa 53:7–8; and Acts 3:13; 4:25, 27, 30; 8:32–33.

D. The Elect Angels

Only in 1 Tim 5:21 does the NT speak of elect angels. “*Eklektos*” here means “chosen,” not “elite” or “choice,” since Paul was calling on all angels to witness. The designation of “elect angels” is quite rare. Schrenk and Quell *TDNT* 4: 144–92 cite *1 En.* 39:1 and Tob 8:15 (contra the RSV) as parallels, but neither reference is unambiguous (*TDNT* 4:185). This election is not to service (since again that would limit the number of angelic witnesses to Paul’s oath) but to retain their holy status. The elect angels contrast with those who fell from their first estate (Jude 6). The elect and holy angels will participate in the judgment (Matt 24:31; 25:31; 2 Thess 1:2–8), while the wicked angels will be judged (1 Cor 6:3).

E. The Corporate Election of Israel

Particularly in Deuteronomy, Israel as a national whole is the “chosen” people of God, as in Deut 7:6

¹ *1 Enoch* 39:1 (Charlesworth) – “And it shall come to pass in those days that the children of the elect and the holy ones [will descend] from the high heaven and their seed will become one with the children of the people.” 48:6 – “For this purpose he became the Chosen One; he was concealed in the presence of (the Lord of the Spirits) prior to the creation of the world, and for eternity.” Tobit 8:15 NRSV has – “So they blessed the God of heaven, and Raguel said, “Blessed are you, O God, with every pure blessing; let all your chosen ones bless you. Let them bless you forever.” The RSV has “let thy *saints* and all thy creatures bless thee.”

“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for his own possession, out of all the peoples that are on the face of the earth” (see Deut 10:15; 14:2; Ps 105:6, 43; Isa 41:8). Election is coupled with the demand for holiness, since the elect nation must reflect the divine character.

It is an oversimplification to say that the older idea of corporate election gives way to individual election in NT theology. In the OT too, there is progression toward a doctrine of individual election for members of the “remnant” (*DOTT* 2: 21–22). Even in the days of the prophets it was clear that “not all Israel is Israel.” The doctrine of individual election developed out of the hope of the holy and elect remnant. In Isa 65:9, “my chosen” form a distinct group within greater Israel who will find eschatological blessing (cf. also Isa 10:20–23 and Isa 14:1— God “will again choose Israel”).

Paul bases his pivotal discussion in Romans 9–11 on the dismissal of the Gospel by the majority of Jews. Paul has to explain why the “chosen people” are rejecting Jesus Christ. He thus reaches back to the remnant concept: history and revelation disclose that within the nation Israel there exist two classes: the unbelieving descendants of Abraham, and the elect believing remnant which God spares from downfall. Paul argues that the remnant of Israel (of which he is a part, Rom 11:1–2) is now turning to Christ in belief through the preaching of the Gospel (Rom 11:7). This remnant is “chosen by grace” (Rom 11:5) and was foreknown (Rom 11:2).

Paul asserts that after the gentile elect enter into salvation, “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26). His quotation from Isa 59:20–21 indicates that he is thinking of the eschatological redemption (see the commentaries, esp. Cranfield *Romans II ICC*, 574–77). Paul is following the line of reasoning found in the OT that salvation is for the elect remnant. Probably the best interpretation of Rom 11:26 is that the “natural branches” of the end time will be beloved and thus elect for the sake of their fathers (Rom 11:28–29). Alternatively, he is enunciating that all believers are elect, whether Jew or gentile, and all the elect shall be saved.

In Pauline thought, the OT doctrine of the remnant points to personal election, that God has elected both Jews and gentiles to be saved. One may therefore adduce the statements of Romans 9–11 as data for the doctrine of individual election.

F. The Corporate Election of the Church

The NT does not thoroughly expound the corporate election of the Church, but the idea is not absent. In 1 Pet 2:9 the Church is called “a chosen race...a holy nation, God’s own people,” reminiscent of biblical titles for the nation of Israel. The connection between God’s choice, holiness, and corporate mission is unmistakable.

Although “the elect” are spoken of collectively, emphasis is usually placed on the sum total of elect individuals, the *eklogoi*, not on the Church as a chosen group.

Christian congregations are possibly called “elect” in 2 John: the “elect lady” of 2 John 1 and “elect sister” in 2 John 13 (see the commentaries). These are isolated occurrences, but cf. the inscription to Ignatius’ *Epistle to the Ephesians* in which he speaks of the “elect” church of Ephesus.²

G. The Election of Individuals to Salvation

In the apocalyptic literature and the literature of the Qumran community (especially CD) individual election comes to the fore more than it does in the OT; this was in order to distinguish the true saints from “false” Israel (*TNDT* 4:170–71). But in the NT there is a bridge to the new nation, composed of Jews and gentiles. The election of gentiles is only broadly foreshadowed in the OT (see Amos 9:12, in which the “nations” are called by God’s name).

1. “The Elect” in the Synoptic Tradition. There are a cluster of references in which Jesus speaks of “the elect” (from *eklektos*), usually in connection with the tribulation (Matt 24:22, 24, 31; Mark 13:20, 22, 27; Luke 18:7). In its present setting, Luke 18:7 claims God’s general protection of his own. Nevertheless, eschatological events uncover whether an individual is elect (Pannenberg 1977: 55): although “many will fall away” (Matt 24:10) the elect will not be deceived by false Christs and false prophets (Matt 24:24). Then at his coming, the Son of Man will “gather his elect” (Matt 24:31). The fact of being elect is eschatologically revealed: “For many are called, but few are chosen” (Matt 22:14).

2. Election in Pauline Theology. In the Synoptic Gospels it is seldom explicit that it is God who chooses individuals. But Paul (with the Fourth Evangelist) develops the concept of election from a more theocentric standpoint. Here *eklegomai* and its synonyms have God as their subject: “God chose you from the beginning to be saved through sanctification by the spirit and belief in the truth” (2 Thess 2:13).

In 1 Cor 1:27–28, Paul analyzes the composition of the Church and makes it clear that the appeal of the Gospel to the lower classes is not merely sociologically defined. While this passage could be taken to refer to corporate election (*TDNT* 4:174), individual election is logically demanded in 1:24, 26. The fact that the socioeconomic makeup of the Church is under God’s control, is not accidental. And control over the Church’s composition demands control over its parts.

Paul develops the doctrine of election further in Rom 8:28–38. God’s choice of the individual is typically underscored in times of persecution. In 8:29–30 Paul sets forth an *ordo salutis*, and illustrates graphically and grammatically that God does not lose any men or women between his choice in eternity past to their glorification (the “elect” first appear in 8:33). He seems to make election synonymous with

² Ignatius, *Eph* Inscr. (Holmes) – “Ignatius, who is also called Theophorus, to the church at Ephesus in Asia, blessed with greatness through the fullness of God the Father, predestined before the ages for lasting and unchangeable glory forever, united and elect through genuine suffering by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ our God, a church most worthy of blessing: heartiest greetings in Jesus Christ and in blameless joy.”

“foreknew” in 8:29. Meanwhile, predestination is the next logical step, God’s determination that the elect shall be Christlike. Paul speaks of “us” as those who are truly elect, not those who merely profess faith and then tend to fall away from Christ, but those who persevere through tribulation to the end. Paul’s emphasis on perseverance as well as preservation by God dovetails nicely with the promise of Matt 24:24.

The modern trend is to read Romans 9–11 as a treatise on the nature of Israel rather than a theology of election (Kümmel 1973: 232). But the passage must be read in the light of its two connects, both with the issue of Jewish salvation, and with his treatment of soteriological election in Rom 8:28–38. Far from being limited to one idea in Romans 9–11, the context indicates that Paul is speaking both of Israel’s destiny and election to salvation.

Paul seldom theologizes out of context. So following his description of God’s election, he applies the doctrine to the problem of Jewish unbelief. He shows that the reason Jews are not turning to Christ as a nation is that God has not elected all the Jews to belief in Christ (Rom 9:11). The Scriptures teach that God’s choice is prior to one’s own existence (Rom 9:1–18) and that election is divine prerogative (Rom 9:19–24). With the prophets, Paul defines Israel as the sum of elect Jews (for him, the Jews elect in Christ), who with the elect gentiles share the blessings of Abraham. While divine election is chronologically prior to faith in Christ, the apostle Paul emphasizes the vital importance of justification by faith—the elect come to light only as they believe in Christ (Romans 10).

When Paul speaks of the basis for God’s election, he refers to divine grace (Rom 11:5; according to 2 Tim 1:9 Christians are called by God’s purpose and grace determined “ages ago”). He clearly spells out that election cannot be attained either through sincere effort (Rom 9:30) nor through works (Rom 11:6) nor through high social status (1 Cor 1:27–28).

Ephesians 1:4 and Col 3:12 both indicate that the end of election is holiness (see Rom 8:29); in fact, Ephesians is in part a treatise on the destiny of the Church from prehistory to its eternal witness to the love of God.

Paul’s theology of election was not developed in a vacuum; it was shaped by his own experiences. He was aware of his own unworthiness as a former persecutor of the Church (Phil 3:2–7; 1 Tim 1:15–16). Thus in Gal 1:13–16 he must say that “he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me.” So also in Acts 22:14: “And he said, ‘The God of our fathers appointed you to know his will, to see the Just One and to hear a voice from his mouth.’” These two passages cannot be reduced to a mere “missionary call,” since his call to faith and his call to mission cannot be separated (see also Acts 13:47). Paul knew he was given both salvation and apostleship through God’s gracious purpose.

Paul’s missionary experiences also reinforced the theology of divine sovereignty. This fact may be the reason why he closely links election to the “call” of God (evidenced by conversion). He tells the Thessalonians that the evidence for their election (1 Thess 1:4) is the fact that the Spirit powerfully

called them from idols to God (1 Thess 1:5–10).

Paul links election with God's foreknowing (*proginoskō*) in Rom 8:29 and 11:2 (cf. 1 Pet 1:2). While Arminian theologians take foreknowledge as prescience of individual faith, it is significant that the object of divine foreknowledge is never specified. It is perhaps the person himself who is foreknown (Rom 8:29 "whom he did foreknow"). Foreknowledge as attributed to God has the flavor of ordaining the future rather than merely knowing the future (*TDNT* 1:715); this is the meaning it most certainly has in regard to Christ in 1 Pet 1:20. Thus 1 Pet 1:2, which

in the original speaks of election “according to the foreknowledge of God,” is well rendered as “chosen and destined by God the Father.”

3. Election in the Gospel of John. John emphasizes the Son’s role in election. The Father is said to have “given” the elect to the Son (John 6:37; 17:2, 6, 9), and Jesus states in John 6:44 that the Father “draws” them to eternal life. The latter concept seems to be equivalent to the Pauline idea of the “call” of God to saving faith.

In John 15:16 Jesus contends: “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit...” (see also 15:19). While this might be read as the call to apostleship, the previous context indicates that he is speaking of “bearing fruit” with those who abide in the True Vine (see the commentaries). This choosing is therefore soteriological and makes the Son the chooser of the elect along with the Father.

4. Election in Other NT Literature. Acts 13:48 contains the striking statement, that “as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” Grammatically it is next to impossible to make the foreordination contingent upon individual faith; rather, Acts postulates with Paul (as in 2 Thess 2:13) that the decision to believe the Gospel follows from God’s choice of the elect.

While Jas 2:5 gives a clear picture of election based on the Beatitudes of Jesus, it is remarkably similar to 1 Cor 1:27–28: “Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom...?”

1 Peter mentions the concept of individual election in 1:2: “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.”

In Rev 17:14 Christ’s people are said to be “called and chosen and faithful.” Prominent, too, is the traditional Book of Life, containing the names of the true saints (Rev 3:5; 13:8; 17:8; 20:12, 15; cf. Luke 10:20).

In all these references to individual election, it is particularly noteworthy that election and faith or faithfulness are linked together. Election is known through its fruit of conversion and perseverance.

5. Individual Election in Christian Theology. Biblically distinct, election and predestination are often interchangeable terms in theological parlance. The meaning of the biblical doctrine of election has been disputed throughout history, particularly in the clashes over Pelagianism in the 5th and 6th centuries and during the Reformation (Berkhouwer 1960: 28–52; Jewett 1985: 5–23). The common denominator is an anthropological question: does fallen humankind yet possess the freedom to turn to salvation apart from elective grace and an efficacious call of the Spirit, or does natural depravity preclude such “freedom of the will”?

Pelagianism taught that the human will was not fatally damaged, and that whatever God commanded, humankind must be free to fulfill. This enabled people to be righteous apart from God’s grace, and removed the need for election. The Council of Orange (529) condemned Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism, according to which the human decision to choose Christ preceded God’s special grace.³

³ See <https://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/Orange5-8.html>

Election was understood as divine prescience of belief, which led to the predestination to Christlikeness. The western Church generally followed a version of Augustine's doctrine of double predestination—of the elect to salvation and of the reprobate to damnation. Election is based solely on God's own grace and will.

The Reformation brought about a reassessment of election within Protestant circles, and defined the terms of the debate to this day. The Reformers seem to have universally held to unconditional election (inexactly known as the "Calvinist" view). In accordance with an Augustinian anthropology, God's choice of individuals to salvation was the first step in salvation, and not contingent upon any faith or work in the elect: "God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once [and] for all to receive into salvation, and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction. We assert that, with respect to the elect, this plan was founded upon his freely given mercy, without regard to human worth" (Calvin 1960, 2: 931).

Arminianism turned out to be the major reaction to unconditional election. Being semi-Pelagianism, it taught that election was conditional, i.e., it was God's choice of those whom he saw would respond to the Spirit's general call. Conditional election has been widely disseminated through the Wesleyan movement. The Five Points of Calvinism highlight differences with Arminianism on the points of depravity, election, the scope of the atonement, calling grace, and the perseverance of saints.

A third alternative is Universalism, according to which all are elect and will be saved in the end.

Karl Barth's theology of election is the most important recent development. It is his position that election is christological, that is, that not a group of individuals but Christ himself is the elect one, and that he is the only man rejected by God. Thus reprobation, being predestined to damnation, falls only on Christ, while election to salvation goes to man.

6. Summary. Christians have long felt the tension between calling on people to believe and at the same time harboring the thought that only the elect will believe and be saved. The doctrine of unconditional election might lead one to fatalism, but it seeks to do justice to the sovereign freedom of God to choose whom he wills. Conditional election might lead to anthropocentricity, since divine choice is conditioned by God's foresight of faith in the individual; while this system by definition deprives God of actual choice, it seeks to approach election pastorally, knowing that without repentance and faith there is no salvation.

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