

Predestination in Paul's Letters

SS 505 – Pauline Epistles and Hebrews

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I. Introduction

Predestination is a concept in Christian theology and soteriology that has been a difficult sticking point between Catholics and some Protestant groups, most notably, those that find their origins in the writings of John Calvin. Many Catholics, when faced with this theological proposition, have resolved this difficulty by roundly rejecting the notion of predestination as a Protestant-Calvinist invention that finds its origins in neither Sacred Scripture nor the Tradition of the Church. Unfortunately, such a resolution fails to garner support from either perspective, scriptural or traditional. The concept of predestination, albeit distinct from Calvin's description of it, occurs in both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition. This discussion will examine four passages in Paul's letters, two from his letter to the Romans and one from the First Letter to Timothy, in order to understand Paul's use of predestination in Scripture. It will then examine those passages as they have been interpreted within the tradition and magisterial teachings of the Church. From these two perspectives, it should be possible to understand better the Catholic doctrine of predestination and to situate it properly in the Catholic understanding of salvation.

II. 1 Timothy 2:4 – God's Universal Salvific Will

In the first letter to Timothy, Paul observes God "desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Tim 2:4)¹ This speaks of God's universal salvific will which has led some to assert God's absolute or unconditioned predestination; this view was notably held by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. It is useful, however, to step back and examine this verse from the perspective of modern scriptural scholarship to understand the scholarly

¹ Harold W. Attridge, Wayne A. Meeks, and J. Jouette M. Bassler, *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006).

justifications for the view. Benjamin Fiore, S.J., observes that this text, along with Paul's use of "savior" to name Jesus, "underlines a key theological position of the [Pastoral Epistles],"² that salvation is reserved for all who come to know the truth, or, if scriptural synonyms are used for terms in that clause, come to a relationship (know) with Jesus Christ (Truth, cf Jn 14:6); this relationship is the express will and desire of God the Father and Christ according to Paul. The truth can also be defined as knowledge of the Gospel.³

While this specific quote does not speak to God's predestining of persons directly, it does speak effectively of his antecedent will that salvation be universal. Hence, it is clear that the Calvinist approach of double predestination does not stand up to the claim of Paul. However, it does make clear that God wills that all be saved. If this is the case, though, then what role can the reaction of faith take, and, since it is also clear than not all finally saved, is God's will somehow thwarted? This question is commonly answered in two ways which can be said, at some level, to be different terms for the same thing: the distinction between God's antecedent and consequent will or that between his general desire and active determination. The former is sometimes called God's active will, and the latter, his permissive will.⁴

If God desires that all come to the knowledge of the truth, then the means by which he does this is through the preaching of the Gospel so that all might come into this knowledge and accept divine revelation and the revealed faith that Paul teaches.⁵ Because of this, Paul extends the call to intercessory prayer to be said on behalf of all, not just the Christian community.⁶

Futhermore, Philip H. Towner observes that Paul's expression that God desires all men to be

² Benjamin Fiore and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Pastoral Epistles: First Timothy, Second Timothy, Titus*, vol. 12, Sacra Pagina Series (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2007), 59.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2015), 11:798.

⁵ *The Interpreter's Bible* (New York, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), 11:399.

⁶ Martin Dibelius and Hans Conzelmann, *The Pastoral Epistles; a Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, Hermeneia--a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), 41.

saved does not so much point to a universalism as an extension of the Christian message beyond the Jews, specifically to Paul's message to the gentiles. Paul is taking this opportunity to combat the frequent foes of his mission to the gentiles, the Judaizers. In other words, Paul is not attempting to indicate God's active will imposes salvation, but rather that salvation comes through Christ, not through the Jewish Laws.⁷ With this in mind, the problem of whether God's will is thwarted by the actions of man becomes moot; such a claim was not what Paul intended, so it does not need to be defended.

III. Romans 8:29 – Paul's Golden Chain

In his letter to the Romans, Paul sets up what has been called the "Golden Chain"⁸ in soteriology. Paul indicates that God, progressively, foreknows, predestines, calls, justifies, and glorifies. Furthermore, God does each of this of his own volition, not as a response to human action. (Rom 8:29-30) This passage is more difficult to understand in light of man's participation in his own salvation. If it is properly said that God does all of these actions based on foreknowledge, then it must be maintained that either God simply is aware of something out of his control or he controls man before any action on the part of man to save him. Both of these are, at the very least, troubling when compared to Catholic soteriology. Several questions need to be answered before this passage can be properly understood. First, when does God know that which Paul indicates he knows. Second, what does God foreknow? Third, what is the relationship of this knowledge to the salvation of a given person.

⁷ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2006), 177; Luke Timothy Johnson and Paulus, *The First and Second Letters to Timothy: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1. Yale Univ. Press impr, The Anchor Yale Bible 35A (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 191.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1996), 531.

C.E.B. Cranfield observes that, while at first glance, God's knowledge seems to simply precede the Christian's knowledge of and relationship with him, the actual indication goes much deeper. In this reflection, Paul sees God as foreknowing before even the creation of the world.⁹ Indeed, such foreknowledge must be of that sort if one is to predicate God as knowing anything; this is the case both since God exists apart from space and time in the created realm and, since he is immutable, he cannot be said to come to knowledge of something.

Douglas Moo observes that the object of God's knowledge seems unlikely to be simply a person's belief. The text does not indicate that God foreknows that a man will come to believe and be saved. Rather, the text indicates that God foreknows persons themselves. If one again uses the biblical connotation of the word know, it better fits the actual syntax and grammar of Paul's words. God foreknows persons, and, eternally, enters into relationship with them – or, rather, allows them to enter into relationship with him, a relationship that, because he is immutable, has existed before the creation of the world.¹⁰

Paul's soteriological golden chain serves to highlight both the earliest stage of salvation, predestination and relationship with God, and the final stage, the glorification in becoming an image, an icon, of Christ. In this text, Paul shows the very close connection between each one of these steps on the path to salvation, steps that begin with God's free gift and end with his reward to the Christian through glorification. Since it was made clear above that God's will is that all be saved, he extends this will to relationship with all men. If those men spurn this relationship, however, they are outside God's plan of salvation. Hence, the foreknowledge of God in this usage is not an awareness of a difference that allows one to merit salvation, but rather an active

⁹ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, The International Critical Commentary on the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (Edinburgh: T&T Clark International, 2004), 431; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 146.

¹⁰ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 532.

gift and relationship that, itself, causes the difference that brings salvation, the full conformity to the image of Christ. In short, this small passage further elucidates the *in Christos* theology found throughout Paul.¹¹

It is notable that some, e.g., John Knox, see this passage as a clear indication of predestination in the sense of a proto-Calvinist view. Knox concedes that Paul did not have a complete system in place as did Calvin in later centuries, but still asserts that there is no way to take this passage in a way that does not logically lead to Calvin's conclusions.¹² However, this claim, while it does seem to effectively ascertain the meaning of Paul's words in a vacuum, fails in light of the rest of Paul's writings and, moreso, in the light of Scripture as a whole. For example, it would be impossible to reconcile the universal salvific will of God that is mentioned above in 1 Timothy with a reading of this text that includes God's choosing of some to be saved and others to be damned.

IV. Romans 9:13 – Jacob I loved. Esau I hated.

One of the most difficult passages to reconcile with the Christian understanding of God's will to salvation is found just a few sentences after what has just been discussed. Here, Paul quotes the prophet Malachi that God "loved Jacob" and "hated Esau." (Rom. 9:13) The most direct way of interpreting this passage is as an indication that God has predestined "Jacob" for beatitude and "Esau" for damnation. However, this interpretation is ultimately untenable since it cannot be reconciled with God's antecedent will that all be saved; in this interpretation, God has an active will that Esau be reprobate.

¹¹ Ibid., 533.

¹² *The Interpreter's Bible*, 9:525.

If such an interpretation is inadmissible, which it is, how can Paul's quote of the prophet Malachi be reconciled? One possibility is that "Jacob" and "Esau" refer not to the persons of these Hebrew patriarchs, but rather to the peoples that these two patriarchs represent. While, at first glance, this seems an acceptable solution, and it is proposed by several scholars, including Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J.,¹³ it is convincingly refuted by Moo and Brendan Byrne, S.J.¹⁴ Moo lays out three reasons for rejecting this interpretation of "Jacob" and "Esau." First, Paul refers to them as having been born and having works attributed to them, something that would be alien language for tribes and peoples rather than persons. Second, the language Paul uses to speak of election is used by Paul exclusively in relation to persons rather than nations. Third, if Paul were speaking of God's call to nations, he would be undoing his own argument that not all those who are direct descendants of Israel are necessarily partakers of the covenant with Israel; put another way, the "physical" and "spiritual" Israel are not necessarily the same; in fact, Paul's argument, based on many Jews rejection of the Gospel and his own mission to the gentiles, is that they are certainly not the same. Participation in God's salvific work comes from belief in and participation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, not the bloodline of Israel.¹⁵

One is left, then, with understanding the words "love" and "hate" in Paul's usage without falling into the trap of double-predestination, which Knox does or comes perilously close to doing.¹⁶ One solution that is sometimes proposed is that the word "hate" is being used as a Semitic poetic expression for loving less.¹⁷ This interpretation is convincingly refuted by

¹³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer and Paulus, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, 1. Yale Univ. Press impr, The Anchor Yale Bible 33 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2008), 563; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 584.

¹⁴ Brendan Byrne, *Romans*, Sacra Pagina Series, v. 6 (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 2007), 295; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 585–586.

¹⁵ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 585.

¹⁶ *The Interpreter's Bible*, 9:543.

¹⁷ Fitzmyer and Paulus, *Romans*, 563.

Cranfield, who points out that a better interpretation is to take love as implying election and hate as its opposite, rejection. While this seems to imply double-predestination, he goes on to a further distinction that resolves this question. Far from rejection being a condemnation to reprobation, those who are rejected from direct participation in the unfolding of salvation history are still “according to the testimony of scripture, [objects] of God’s merciful care.”¹⁸ One need only consider the scriptural reactions of God to Esau or even Cain to see this.

To summarize, there seem to be two major questions that must be answered in the discussion of Romans 9:13. First, who is the referent of “Jacob” and “Esau,” and, second, what is indicated by “love” and “hate” in this verse. While it would, perhaps, be simplest to resolve the perilous closeness of double-predestination by deciding that the names of the patriarchs are ciphers for the nations that carry their names and “love” and “hate” are simply usage of a Semitic poetic style to indicate “loved more” and “loved less,” these interpretations ultimately break down. Rather, it seems more likely that “Jacob” and “Esau” refer to the persons who carried those names and their level of direct participation in God’s ultimate plan of salvation, a plan which was ultimately carried out through Jacob rather than Esau, hence his “love” and election. At the same time, it must be recognized that God’s “hatred” of Esau cannot be said to have been equivalent to rejection to damnation since God promised also to make of him a great nation.

V. Predestination and Scriptural Evidence in the Living Tradition of the Church

It is clear from the Scriptural passages discussed above that predestination, by some definition, is a perennial teaching of the Church. However, the Church is also clear that God does not, at least in his active or antecedent will, condemn persons to perdition as part of her belief. (CCC 600, 1037)

¹⁸ Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 480.

Perhaps the most important distinction to be made within the available options and theories within the scope of Catholic teaching is the question of conditioned or unconditioned predestination. That is, to what extent is a person's merit factored in to his salvation. Each of these positions cite Scripture for support. Unconditioned predestination, championed by Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, cite the two passages from Romans discussed in this paper. Opposing this interpretation, the Molinists and Saint Francis de Sales, champions of conditioned predestination, cite God's universal salvific will as expressed in 1 Timothy 2:4. It is important to note that both of these are valid Catholic positions. Calvinist positive reprobation, however, is not an acceptable position in the tradition of the Church nor a feasible exegetical interpretation of the full canon of Scripture.

Conditioned predestination, the position of Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, is built with significant reference to 1 Timothy 2:4, which was discussed above from a scholarly perspective. Augustine reflected on the meaning of this statement in Timothy from the perspective of positive predestination to heaven by noting that God's will that all men be saved reflects that no group is necessarily excluded from salvation. In this, he observed that God's grace is extended to all, but that does not necessarily lead to a universal salvation, a view the Church has never held and can never hold.¹⁹ Elsewhere, Augustine offers an alternate reading; God's universal salvific will does not imply that his will is thwarted by man, but rather that salvation necessarily comes only through God's will.²⁰ This reading parallels the understanding

¹⁹ Philip Schaff, ed., *Saint Augustin: Anti-Pelagian Writings*, vol. 5, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 1 (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 489.

²⁰ Philip Schaff, ed., *St. Augustin: On the Holy Trinity, Doctrinal Treatises, Moral Treatises*, vol. 3, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 1 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 270.

of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* as it is understood and expounded explicitly since the Holy Office's correction of Father Feeney in the twentieth century.

The difficulty of the language of Paul's quote from the prophet Malachi in Romans 9:13 necessitates examining that passage as it has been used in the teachings of the Church and reflections of the great theologians of history as well as the contemporary scholarly reflection above. This passage is discussed in Chrysostom's homilies with the explanation that one could be loved and the other hated before either was born because of God's divine knowledge of all regardless of space and time.²¹ This interpretation already leads to the Molinist and Salesian view that God responds to a person's virtue or vice and gives his grace in proportion to that virtue. Augustine, however, rejects this interpretation. He asserts that Paul would have mentioned future works if that were his intention. Rather, according to Augustine, Paul defends this position by appealing to the Lord's words to Moses; God's mercy, therefore, is of his own will, and it cannot be impacted by man's virtue or vice, by his works at all. The challenge with this interpretation, however, is that it risks making God's treatment of man entirely capricious. Aquinas' opinion, as mentioned above, agrees with Augustine. In his estimation, defining a relationship between merit and grace in any way would be to fall to the errors of Pelagianism.

When Aquinas specifically addresses the quote from Malachi, he does concede that God's love and hate proceeds from judgment based on foreknowledge of the merit or sin of each, not from capricious or random decision. In fact, according to Aquinas, God loves each man from eternity such that he wills the absolute good for each. Aquinas observes that election and love are not the same in man, and, in man, love follows election. Hence, a man perceives a thing,

²¹ Philip Schaff, *Saint Chrysostom: Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles and the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 11, A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church 1 (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1889), 464–465.

observes that it is good, then loves it on account of the perceived good in it. In contrast, God's love is eternal, and he loves each man absolutely on account of his good works or hates the sin in any man.²²

VI. Conclusion

With all this in mind, it is clear that the doctrine of predestination is not only permissible in the Christian religion, it is necessary. This doctrine is found and defended in both Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition; to abandon it would be to abandon Christianity and, almost certainly, fall into some form of Pelagianism. At the same time, Scripture and Tradition make it clear that God is not capricious in his treatment of man. He does not arbitrarily elect or condemn men, but rather bestows sufficient grace for election on all and desires salvation for all (1 Tim 2:4); God does not predestine anyone to perdition as Calvin proposed. Whether God's grace is poured out on all men equally, variably according to his own designs (Rom 9:13), or based on the merit he foresees in a given person (Rom 8:29) remains undefined in both Scripture and Tradition. Good arguments can be and have been made by varying authorities in the Church, but she has refrained from defining definitively this matter. Hence, it is permissible to hold any of these three: that God pours grace on all, a common contemporary interpretation, that his grace is bestowed solely according to his will, a view proposed by Augustine and Aquinas, or that he bestows his grace based on the receptiveness of the vessel, that is, based on the merit and virtue toward which a man will use that grace.

²² Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans*, ed. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón, trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P., vol. 37, *Commentaria Biblica* (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012), 253–255.

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