

Predestination - Divine Intention

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Rom. 8:29, 30).

Do you believe in predestination?” My interlocutor knew that I did not, but asked the question anyway. He was thinking that by quoting Romans 8:29, 30 or one of the three other similar texts (Acts 4:28; 1 Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 1:5–12), he could win an easy theological victory. Not quite.

My disbelief in the doctrine of predestination is primarily philosophical. If God, through sovereign decisions, predestines some to salvation and some to damnation, then surely He is the ultimate source of sin and suffering. Furthermore, if a person also believes that hell consists of everlasting torment (which I do not believe), the problem is greatly compounded: God considers guilty those who never had a choice in the first place and punishes them with a punishment immeasurably disproportionate to the sins that they committed and over which they had no choice.

However, I am a biblical scholar who deals primarily with the text, and so when confronted with a text like Romans 8:29, 30, I have to put aside my philosophical outlook, stare at the text directly, and—through an examination of things such as vocabulary, syntax, and context—try to determine its true meaning.

MODERN GREEK USAGE

The word translated “predestined” in Romans 8:29, 30 and in the other relevant texts is the Greek verb *proorizō*, a compound word made up of the preposition *pro* (“before”) and the verb *orizō* (“appoint, decide, determine”). The cognate noun *proorismos* does not appear in the Bible but will be briefly discussed, for this word is relevant. Etymologically, neither word denotes predestination of the type understood by Calvin or Augustine and their followers. The focus of both is intention rather than result, as we will see below.

Both words are very common in modern Greek. The verb *proorizō* is used primarily of parents making plans for their children. For example, a couple may want their son to become a doctor. To facilitate this goal, they might send him from an early age to the best schools, put money aside for his education, hire private tutors for afterschool tutorials, limit his free time, or even curb his social interactions. When parents do this, Greeks would say that they are *proorizō* the son to be a doctor. This is their intention.

Of course, there is no guarantee the son will become a doctor. The son may discover that he does not have the acumen or the perseverance to become a doctor, or he may prefer to become a teacher, engineer, football player, or (better still) pastor. *Proorizō* highlights intention, not result.

The force of the cognate noun *proorismos* is similar. Primarily, this word designates the destination of a journey. If a person decides to travel from point A to point B, then point B becomes his *proorismos*, his destination. When he sets out, he may have every intention of reaching the destination. But a host of reasons—a last-minute change of plans, a flat tire, an accident—may prevent him from reaching the intended destination.

Neither the verb *proorizō* nor the noun *proorismos* carries the meaning proposed in the Calvinist doctrine of predestination; rather, both focus on intention. This may explain why there are very few predestinarians in Greece, even among ecclesial bodies, who traditionally believe in predestination.

But to what extent may we use modern Greek to understand biblical Greek?

First, *proorizō* and *proorismos* are extremely rare in ancient literature. As such we will be well served to look at their use in more modern times, as we just did; after all, contemporary Greek is a close cognate to biblical Greek. Second, while the Greek language has evolved through the centuries in syntax and grammar, vocabulary has been the least affected aspect of the language. Modern Greek uses much the same vocabulary as biblical Greek and with much the same meaning.

ANCIENT GREEK USAGE

Useful though it may be, we do not need to rely only on modern Greek. Classical Greek concurs with the above picture. We have one clear use in secular Greek, in the writings of the medical doctor Hippocrates (fourth century b.c.), who uses *proorismos* to describe the desired outcome when medication is administered.

Several uses in the writings of the Greek fathers also indicate intention. Origen (third century a.d.) notes that the call of the gospel is the beginning, not the destination (*proorismos*), of the Christian walk. Anastasius (c. a.d. 700) likewise explains, in his rebuttal of predestination, that if there was such a thing as absolute predestination (*propepēgmenos kai ametathētos proorismos*) people who became sick would not call for healing or go to doctors. The very fact that Anastasius uses the words *propepēgmenos kai ametathētos*, meaning “presettled/prehardened and irrevocable,” to qualify the word *proorismos* indicates that, both for him and his readers, the word *proorismos* alone did not convey the essence of predestination.

John of Damascus (seventh–eighth centuries a.d.) ties *proorismos* with God’s will and foreknowledge and notes specifically that God “does not will evil to happen neither does He force virtue/goodness.” This implies that divine *proorismos* is not absolute but allows human choice. Methodius I (ninth century a.d.) uses *proorizō* together with the phrase *proaireseōs anthrōpinēs*, meaning “human will/desire/choice.” The fact that the human will, desire, or choice involves divine *proorismos* indicates that no absolute predestination is in view.

We see from the above that the meaning of *proorizō* and *proorismos* has remained constant in Greek from classical times to modern, and that the emphasis is on intention not irrevocable result. We will now see that the syntax also points in the same direction.

THE SYNTAX OF INTENTION

Equally important to vocabulary is syntax. In biblical Greek, when verbs of cognition or volition, such as *proorizō*, appear in the aorist or perfect tenses, they are usually accompanied by an infinitive (e.g., Matt. 13:17; Luke 15:16; Acts 4:28; 21:25; 25:25; 27:1; 1 Cor. 7:31; 2 Cor. 2:1; Titus 3:12). This is also the case with *proorizō* in at least three cases (Acts 4:28; Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:11, 12).

In both classical and biblical Greek, the infinitive is habitually used to indicate intention or result. While the notion of result might suggest that predestination could be in view, this

is not so. When the action in view is still in the future, the infinitive designates intended result. Indeed, in the development of the Greek language, the use of the infinitive slowly subsided, and verbs of volition began, instead, to take a subjunctive. The subjunctive is a mood of potentiality in contrast to the indicative, which more solidly establishes reality. This is indicated also in English by renderings of volition verbs such as “decided to,” “determined to,” and “wanted to.”

That potentiality is the most natural accompaniment to verbs of volition is self-evident. When I say that I have decided to do something or want to do something, the implication is that the decision or desire, though firmly established in my mind, must yet await its realization in practice. I have decided to do something; whether I get the opportunity to carry it out remains to be seen.

In the transition from classical to biblical Greek, the infinitive was sometimes replaced by a prepositional phrase. With regard to the use of *proorizō* in the New Testament (NT), we see that four times the verb is accompanied by a prepositional phrase. In Romans 8:29, *proorizō* is followed by *eis to einai auton* (“so that He might become”); in 1 Corinthians 2:7, *eis doxan ēmōn* (“for our glory”); in Ephesians 1:5, *eis huiōthesian* (“for adoption”); in Ephesians 1:11, 12, *eis to einai ēmas* (“so that we might be”). The preposition *eis* may indicate geographical or chronological movement or intent. Since *proorizō* does not deal with time or geography, the first two options are out. The only use of the preposition *eis* that fits is intent. Moreover, in two of the four verses (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:11, 12) where we have a prepositional phrase, we also have the infinitive *einai* (“to be”). As we already noted, infinitives indicate intent or intended result.

We conclude that the syntax of the verb *proorizō* in the NT clearly and unequivocally indicates divine intention, either through the use of the infinitive with *proorizō* or through the use of prepositional phrases that indicate intent.

THE CONTEXT OF INTENTION

Last but not least is the evidence from the context. Space does not permit a full contextual discussion of the texts of predestination, but a few points are worth mentioning.

Acts 4:28 records the words of believers after Peter and John had been released from their arrest. At first sight, it appears that the sufferings of Jesus at the hands of Jews and Gentiles was predestined: “‘to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined [*proōrisen*] to take place.’” But immediately afterward, the believers continue with an entreaty to the Lord for His protection: “‘And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness’” (v. 29).

Why entreat the Lord for protection if all things had been predestined from the beginning? Such an entreaty makes sense only in the context of the battle between good and evil. The disciples know that they can gain victory only if the Lord intervenes on their behalf, and so they entreat Him to do as much.

In 1 Corinthians 2:1–10, Paul explains that, when he first came to Corinth, he came in weakness and was filled with fear and trembling (v. 3), possibly because of the relative lack of success in Athens, which had been his previous stop, or perhaps because of the

notorious reputation of Corinth. In such a context, Paul “decided” (*ekrina*) to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified (v. 2). Why fear and tremble if everything is predestined? And in what context did Paul “decide” what to preach if all was predestined?

The verb *proōrisen* here applies to the “secret and hidden wisdom of God” (v. 7), the plan of salvation as realized in Christ and His death on the cross. Was the sacrifice of Jesus predestined to happen? We should think very hard before we answer in the affirmative. The sacrifice of Jesus would make the temptation of Satan, “ ‘All these [kingdoms] I will give you, if you fall down and worship me’ ” (Matt. 4:9), or the taunt of the thieves on the cross, “ ‘Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us’ ” (Luke 23:39), look meaningless. Indeed, even the entreaty of Jesus at Gethsemane, “ ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will’ ” (Matt. 26:39), would seem empty.

If all had been predestined before, then the entreaty carries no meaning. By contrast, if we understand *proorizō* to refer to intention, to God’s plan for the salvation of humanity, then the words of Jesus take on an amazing depth, reflecting His own unyielding commitment to the salvation of humankind. Jesus first agreed to the plan when it was laid out before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). And, again, in Gethsemane, in human form and in the moment of His greatest weakness, He willingly submitted Himself to go through with the plan of salvation. Christ was not obliged to die for humanity, a slave to sovereign predestination; He willingly and fully gave Himself over to be crucified.

In Romans 8:29, God *proōrisen* believers “to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” The words “to be conformed” bring in the element of potentiality. The words “in order that he might be” translated from the Greek *eis to einai*, a construction that, as noted above, habitually indicates intention or purpose.

Furthermore, God’s intentions are focused on “those whom he foreknew,” (Rom. 8:29), indicating that His plans are based not on arbitrary sovereignty but on the intimate knowledge of human beings and their response to the gospel. The whole construction speaks primarily of God’s intentions and plans. While there is a strong assurance in Romans 8:30 that God’s plan will come to reality for committed believers, the language of intent and potentiality noted here indicates that no predestination in the Calvinist sense is in view, only the working out of the will of God in the hearts of those who respond.

Finally, in Ephesians 1:5–12, Paul explains how, in Christ, God *proorisas* believers to receive the gift of salvation. This gift is offered *kata prothesin*, “according to [God’s] purpose,” not according to an arbitrary, sovereign decision. The passage is peppered with infinitives and prepositional phrases highlighting intention (*eis huiōthesian*, *eis epainon doxēs*, *eis oikonomian*, *anakefalaiōsasthai*, *eis to einai*). The focus yet again is on God’s intentions and purposes, not on a predestined outcome.

SYNTHESIS

We have looked at the vocabulary, syntax, and context of texts that are cited in support of predestination. The vocabulary underlines intention/purpose and not predestined outcome. The syntax puts the emphasis on intention/purpose and not predestined outcome. The context is saturated with words and syntactical constructions that highlight

intention/purpose and not predestined outcome. Nothing in these texts requires they be read as teaching predestination.

Predestinarians may counterargue that, in God's sphere, intention/ purpose equals result because God is sovereign and all powerful, and that His will always will be brought to fruition. But such an outlook is theological/philosophical, not exegetical. As far as exegesis is concerned, the vocabulary, syntax, and context put the emphasis on intention. Had the NT writers wanted to put the emphasis on the absolute determinativeness and irrevocability of God's intentions, they could have easily phrased their writings differently.

The picture I get from studying the texts of *proorizō* and *proorismos* is of a God who, like a gentle Father, lovingly makes every provision for the salvation of the humans He created. He pursues us with His grace, rebukes us to restoration, visits us even when we turn our backs on Him, and empowers us to walk the walk of faith. And He has done and does everything necessary for our salvation.

But, beyond all His best efforts, we must give our consent if the plan of salvation is to become a reality in our lives. He will never force His will on us. This may lead to the painful reality that though God wants all to be saved (2 Pet. 3:9) and Christ indeed died for all (John 1:29), not all will be saved. Some may be lost by their own free choice. Such is our loving God, a God I can relate to, both philosophically and exegetically.