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Election in Ephesians 1: Individual or Corporate?

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Introduction

The theology of election³ is one of the themes that puts into perspective God's plan and will regarding human salvation. It is also

¹ His books include *The Prophetic Imagination & the Creation of Alternative community: A Theological Reflection on Israelitic Prophetic Tradition and its Relevance for our Church Today*, Seat of Wisdom Lecture Series 2 (Owerri: Edu-Edy Publications, 2007; 52p), *The Emergence of Christian identity in Paul's Letter to the Galatians: A Social-Scientific Investigation into the Root Causes for the Parting of the Way between Christianity and Judaism*, Arbeiten zur Interkulturalität 4 (Bonn: Verlag Norbert M. Borengässer, 2003; 480p), *Confrontational Evangelization: Foundations, Features & Prospects* (Onitsha: Effective Key Publishers, 1995; 146p), *An Open Letter to Dives and Lazarus* (Enugu: SNAAP Press, 1993; 62p), and many articles with such journals as *Oche-Amamihe: Wisdom Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church*, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, *The Nigerian Journal of Theology*, *The Oracle*, *Koinonia*, *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, *Journal of Inculturation Theology*, and *Afrika Forum*.

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a theme that is basic to the self-understanding of Israel and her Scripture, as well as to the New Testament and the early Church. But the very idea that God “chooses a people or individuals to belong to him in a unique way,”⁴ has been a controversial one in the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Among the questions that this conviction raises include: Is election the sovereign act of God whereby He chose some to salvation solely on the basis of sovereign grace apart from their merits; or is the sovereign act of God whereby he chooses those whom He foreknew would respond to His gracious initiation? Does God’s election embrace the entire humanity without distinction; or is it only for some special group of the elect? Is God’s election corporate, presupposing the incorporation of the individual into the body of the “elect,” or is it individual, in which case every elect is adopted directly und unmediated into God’s family with full filial position and privileges?

These are questions raised by Paul’s discourse on election in the very beginning of the first chapter of his letter to the Ephesians (1:3-14). Through an examination of these passages, this essay argues that God’s election of the Church in Christ is in continuation of his election of Israel of old; that this election is utterly gratuitous and unconditional; that it has something to do with mission, since individuals are not elected for their own sake but for the sake of service; and that in the New Dispensation and according to the eternal design of God individuals are elected by virtue of Christ’s election, and they (individuals) benefit from the grace of election by their incorporation into the Church, the body of Christ. To understand the concept of election in the first chapter of Ephesians, however, it is necessary to review the election concept in the Hebrew Bible, and how this was interpreted in the Christian New Testament to include the Church, the elect community of Jews and Gentiles.

Understanding the Election Concept

There is no scholarly consensus on the precise definition of the term election or the range of religious convictions in biblical sources to which the term may be properly applied. The classic Hebrew

⁴ Shogren, G. S. “Election,” in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), pp. 434-444 (434).

vocabulary expressing this term is $\text{r}\chi\text{B}$ which means “to choose” or “to elect;” and in Greek, the verb $\epsilon\kappa\lambda\epsilon\gamma\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$, which means “to choose” and the noun $\epsilon\kappa\lambda\omicron\gamma\eta$, election are used.⁵ Prior to its theological adaptation, the Hebrew $\text{r}\chi\text{B}$ was used for everyday human act of choosing or selecting. It was equally used of human decisions made within the moral and religious discourse of ancient Israel. The Akkadian word “*bêrum*” (to choose) is the most important Semitic parallel to the Hebrew $\text{r}\chi\text{B}$. There is a link here to the Semitic idea of *segullah*, that is, of special possession (from the Akkadian *sigiltu*), a term that is rooted in the Ancient Near East political sphere where the sovereign singles out his vassal by giving him a status of “*sglt*” which means “special property.” Israel’s, however, was a unique situation in that theirs was the first time that a nation was introduced into the domain of the sacred, having become the special possession of God and the object of his special protection.

The Theology of Election in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, election is the hermeneutical key to the understanding and perception of the nature of God’s covenant with Israel.⁶ The verb, $\text{r}\chi\text{B}$ (“to elect, to choose”), with its cognates occurs over 164 times. Israel is the object of God’s choice and election. YHWH chose out this one people (Israel) as His own, bestowing upon it a unique value. He chose her out of all peoples and set her apart. The particularity of Israel was expressed in the ancient Israelite sources by expressions such as “knew” ($\text{I}\chi\text{B}$) and “separated” (IdB). Thus, that Abraham was known by God means that he was singled out in order that his descendants will keep justice and righteousness (cf. Gen 18:19). The same expression is found in Amos 3:2: “You alone have I known from the families of the earth.” In the Holiness Code, the particularity of Israel is expressed by the phrase “separate,” “set apart” (Lev 20:26).

⁵ For extensive treatment of the Hebrew term $\text{r}\chi\text{B}$, see H. Seebass, “ $\text{r}\chi\text{B}$ ” in J. G. Botterweck, H. Ringgren, H.-J. Fabry (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1977), 2:73-87; G. Quell, “ $\epsilon\lambda\epsilon\gamma\omicron\mu\alpha\iota$, Election in the Old Testament,” in G. Kittel (ed.) *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 4, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 145-171.

⁶ Walbert Bühlmann, *God’s Chosen People*, translated from the German by Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1982), p. 28.

But although the religious convictions that Israel was the peculiar possession of YHWH certainly goes back to the very beginnings of Israel, and although earlier traditions reaffirm a unique and exclusive relationship between Israel and YHWH, the use of $\Gamma\chi\beta$ as a theological expression of this conviction appears for the first time in Deuteronomy. In this sense, the book of Deuteronomy could be said to be responsible for the final theological elaboration of the doctrine of election, even though it did not create it.

Deuteronomy conceives the election of Israel as due to the love YHWH had for Israel's forefathers (Cf. Deut 7:6); and never because of Israel's merits or number (Deut 9:4-6; 7:7). It is YHWH who "set his heart on you and chose you" (Deut 7:7). Less Israel should be puffed up on account of being the elect of YHWH, the author of Deuteronomy was quick to add: "Not because you are greater than other peoples did the Lord become attached to you and choose you – for you are the least of all peoples. No, it was for love of you..." (7:7-8). YHWH does not seek worthiness, He bestows it. His choice of Israel is determined by the nature of God, namely: His love; and not by the characteristics or excellence of Israel. In the words of Rowley, the term election points to the indemonstrable mystery of the love of God for his people.⁷ The only reason for Israel's choice is to be found in YHWH's will, in His incomprehensible love for His people,⁸ in His loving kindness or covenantal fidelity ($\delta\sigma\eta$).

However, election also contains a mission for the elect; and it is only within the context of this mission that the elect could comprehend God's choice. Because of her election, Israel becomes a people holy to YHWH, with the obligation of recognizing YHWH alone as God and of keeping His commandments (Deut 4:39-40; 7:9ff.). Being the elect places a responsibility on Israel, a responsibility that is shared by no other nation. Failure to meet this responsibility brings severe consequences upon Israel. In fact, the result of Israel's election is to bind her to a destiny incomparable to that of other nations, i.e., either extraordinary prosperity or unparalleled misfortune (Deut 28).

⁷ Rowley, H. H., *The Biblical Doctrine of Election*, quoted in Seebass, " $\Gamma\chi\beta$," p.84.

⁸ Shogren, "Election," p. 435.

While the technical term $\Gamma\chi\beta$ was not frequently used in the prophetic books, the prophets often speak of a unique relationship established at YHWH's initiative (see especially Hos 11"1-4; 4:2; 9:1). Being "known" ($\Gamma\chi\beta$) by YHWH, a phrase found in most of the prophetic books, is indeed tantamount to having been chosen or elected by Him. The prophets also underlined the mutually exclusive relationship which existed between YHWH and Israel, the chosen one. The very identity of Israel was defined by this relationship so much so that when the relationship is ruptured through Israel's apostasy, the people lose that which distinguishes them from other nations. Israel could come to its true identity only by a "conversion" of heart after the power politics and lust had brought them to ruin.⁹

God's choice of Israel is not just an action that took place once and for all in a distant past; it is a design that is realized permanently in a plurality of elections in which YHWH provides support for His people. Election is unalterable because God is ever faithful to His promise, and will always restore stability to the order of election just as he restored the stability to the order of creation. This point is to be underlined as it will help to shed light on the Pauline emphasis on God's election of all in Christ before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4).

Israel's Election as Vocation

God's choice of Abraham and with him of Israel was for the benefit of the rest of humanity: "... in you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen 12:3). In the concrete case of this one people, all peoples were chosen. The choice of Israel is not to be understood exclusively but inclusively. Israel's is a special case in which the election of all peoples is to become visible and tangible. As Seebass succinctly puts it:

The horizon of the election of the people of Israel in the Old Testament is the peoples of the world, in relationship to which as a whole the "individual" Israel was chosen. Bahar as a technical term for the election of the people of Israel stands under the symbolism of universalism.¹⁰

⁹ Shogren, "Election," 438-439.

¹⁰ Seebass, " $\Gamma\chi\beta$," 83

This same idea came into fore especially with the Prophets. According to the prophetic writings, Israel's choice does not imply a rejection of other nations.¹¹ Rather, they (the nations) are to be beneficiaries of Israel's election at the end of history. Especially in the classical prophets, we notice that the distinction between Israel and the nations is only provisional, and that at the denouement of history, the nations will be incorporated into the one people of God. One such passage, Isa 19:19-25 speaks of the conversion of Egypt and by implication of Assyria, the two great powers of Isaiah's day to YHWH, concluding with an explicit reference to the election language. A similar idea is also found in the writings of the anonymous prophet of Babylonian exile, the Deutero-Isaiah who announced the conversion and incorporation of all peoples into Israel (Isa 45:20-25). Just as it was for the sake of the peoples that the patriarchs and the prophets received their vocation, so Israel was called for the sake of the nations, who are always on God's horizon.

Passages in the Hebrew Scripture that run counter to this position must be considered in their literary genre. For example, when the sacred author places in YHWH's mouth "Jacob I loved, but I hated Esau" (Mal 1:2-3), this anthropomorphic manner of speaking does not actually militate against the unfathomable love of God that ever embraces all human beings – including those whose "reprobation" is here humanly dramatized. ."¹² Thus, it was not because God had no care for other peoples that he chose Israel, but precisely because he cared for other peoples. Israel was not elected to a privilege but to a service: to reveal God's affection for all peoples.

Election in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the concept of election is understood as the choice of God, hitherto carried out in the distant past, of those who will constitute the eschatological community of the Holy. It equally applies to God's selection of those who will render him special service in different ways (Gal 1:15-16; Acts 9:15; 13:47). Practically all the traditions of the New Testament were convinced that Jesus was the chosen one, elected by the Father to fulfill His

¹¹ Only once in the Old Testament is it actually said that YHWH chose Israel and rejected someone else (Esau/Edom in Mal 1:2-3). See Shogren, "Election," 440.

¹² *Bühlmann, The Chosen Peoples*, 35.

eternal plan, namely, the salvation of the entire humanity (Luke 24:46-48; Acts 3:20; Eph 1:9-10; 1 Pet 1:20; 2:4; Rev 13:8). Those who taunt and insult Jesus accuse him of claiming to be “the Christ of God, His Chosen One” (Luke 23:25). Some manuscripts of the Gospels refer to Christ as the “Chosen One” (~~ekl~~ *ekt oj*) in connection with God’s approval of him as the “beloved son” (cf. Isa 42:1; Matt 12:8; John 1:34; Luke 9:35).

The title “Chosen One” is derived from the servant passages of Isaiah 41-42. Here, the Servant Songs contain the language of election and calling when speaking of the servant Israel and of individual servant (Isa 41:8-9; 42:1). In the early Church, the Servant Songs were read as predictions of Jesus¹³ and by this the early Church affirmed that “Christ did not thrust himself upon this work, but was duly chosen into it; Christ was so God’s chosen as to be the head of election, and of all other Elect, for we are chosen in him.”¹⁴ It is therefore Christ who forms the point of departure for any election in the New Testament.

The Elect in the New Testament

In the New Testament, the term elect conveys a relationship to God which assures one of God’s security. In the teachings of Jesus, the elect refers to a group not closely defined but seemingly a qualitative term which perhaps is analogous to the ‘righteous remnant’ of Old Testament prophecy. In Mark 13:20, God will shorten the days for the sake of the elect; false prophets will almost lead even the elect astray; at the end of time, God will convoke the elect from the four winds. In the parallel passage of Luke 18:7, we are also told that God will vindicate his elect (cf. Rom 8:33).¹⁵

In some way, it may be assumed that the elect are identifiable with the Christian Church in the New Testament. 1 Peter 1:2 addressed the exiles of the Dispersion as “chosen and destined... and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ.” 1 Peter 2:9-10 even went to the extent of explicitly taking over an Old Testament

¹³ Cullmann, O., *The Christology of the New Testament*, revised edition (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 51-82.

¹⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (U.S.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2005), p. 1672.

¹⁵ G. E. Mendenhall, “Election,” in G. Buttrick et al (eds.), *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* Interpreter’s Dictionary, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985 reprint), 76-82 (81).

terminology for Israel and applying it to the Christian community: “But you are ‘a chosen people’ [Isa 43:20], ‘a royal priesthood, a people sanctified’ [Exod 19:6], ‘a people that was acquired for the purpose of proclaiming his deeds of renown’ [Isa 43:21] who has called you out of the darkness into wondrous light. Once you were no people. But now you are a people of God.” Here, the author applies the classic texts of the chosen people’s covenant theology to the communities of the Church of Christ composed of Gentile Christians (cf. Titus 2:14; 1:1; Rev 17:14; 2 Peter 1:10; Col 3:12; 2 Tim 2:10; 2 John 1:1 and 1 Thess 1:4).

Like in the Old Testament (especially in Deuteronomy), the New Testament also defends the thesis that election is at God’s initiative, and that this does not depend on any quality of the individual recipient. Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians of God’s choice of the weak, foolish, despised and lowly in order to put to shame their opposites (1 Cor 1:26-28). The same message is reflected in James 2:5 where God is said to have chosen the poor to make them rich in faith.¹⁶ In both instances, there is a specific denial of any intrinsic superiority on the part of the chosen, so that “no human being might boast,” as Paul concludes (1 Cor 1:29). In the New Testament therefore, election is grounded deeply in the love and grace of God.¹⁷

But even though election is entirely gratuitous, there is need for the elect to respond to gratuity of God’s choice. God’s election, therefore, must be confirmed by the faithfulness, obedience and personal appreciation of the elect. As such, no historical continuity of biological descent, political or social institution is necessary as a formal prerequisite by which the elect are to be identified (cf. John 1:13). The elect, then, are not carriers of a badge of honour expressing pride or a claim of prestige and privilege of some social group. Rather, they are those who have responded to the call of God and consequently manifest the characteristics of the elect. This response of the elect, however, is never the ground or precondition for the election. God’s election is completely gratuitous and completely unconditional.

¹⁶ See also the Magnificat of Mary in Luke 1:46ff.

¹⁷ Mendenhall, “Election,” p. 81

Election in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians

The letter to the Ephesians is among the greatest letters under the name of the apostle Paul. Though it has but six rather short chapters and is written in an often painfully ponderous style, it conveys weighty doctrines, warm exhortations and above all, an urgent invitation to praise God.¹⁸ In principle, Ephesians does not address the whole Church in Ephesus but only the members of Gentile origin, people whom Paul had not known personally and who had been converted and baptized after his final departure from that city.¹⁹ The purpose of the letter is to settle and establish the Ephesians in the truth and to further acquaint them with the mystery of the gospel.

The letter was written from Rome as Paul was in prison there. If this position was uncontested up until the 18th century AD; today, arguments have arisen to prove or disprove Pauline authorship. Some who argue against a Pauline authorship base their argument on content, vocabulary and style of the letter, which for them deviate substantially from the so-called authentic Pauline letters.²⁰ Against this argument, proponents of a Pauline authorship propose that the core of the letter is Pauline, and attribute the variance pointed out above to the use of a disciple or scribe.

Not minding the conflicting opinions of the various scholars about the authorship of the letter, the thesis that is defended in this essay is that the letter itself clearly identifies Paul as its author, and not enough convincing reasons have been offered to warrant our rejecting this. What is more? The massive vision of a new humanity, a new household of God, rising together to reconcile warring human beings to each other and to God (chap. 2) – and all of this the product of God's predestining love (1:3-14) and unqualified grace (2:8-10) – is entirely in line with Paul's emphases on God's sweeping sovereignty in constitution his people (Rom 9-11) and giving them the

¹⁸ Markus Barth, *Ephesians 1-3*, The Anchor Bible 34 (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 3

¹⁹ Barth, *Ephesians*, p. 4

²⁰ In the words of Onwukeme Victor, *Being all things to all peoples* (Iperu-Remo: The Ambassador Publications, 2007), p. 139: "The literary style (long sentences and frequent chains of nouns in the genitive and a barrage of lofty phrases) raises doubt as to whether this is the work of Paul."

Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace which he lavished upon us. For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, **to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth** (Eph 1:3-11)

The opening word “blessed” (Euloghtoj) declares the focus of this section. Paul affirms that God is blessed, and then elaborates on how God expressed this blessedness towards humanity in salvation.²⁴ The subject of the blessing is God the Father, who has blessed the recipients of the letter with every spiritual blessing. God is the active agent all throughout the doxology and the benefactors of His activity are human beings. It is God who has “blessed” (v. 3), chosen (v. 4), “predestined,” “freely bestowed” (v. 5), “lavished redemption and forgiveness (vv7-8), “made known” and “purposed” (v. 9), given an inheritance, working everything according to His will (v. 11), sealed (v. 13), and given the Holy Spirit (v. 14).

Of particular significance for us is that Paul here employs the verb *exel exato* (from *ekl egonai*) the technical term for election, with God as the subject.²⁵ Paul here describes the single attitude and act of God. One sees a reappearance of the Old Testament understanding of the concept of *rxB* in which God is always the subject. The emphasis is on the subject, His activity and aim. God has made a specific choice, which is directed by His own purpose. The point of difficulty is the nature of God’s choice. Does it include the sense of choosing out of a group, thus excluding a portion of them? While this may appear to be the correct reading of the passage, this must not necessarily be so given what we have already said about the vocational implications of God’s choice.

Paul then goes ahead to assert that this choice is made “before the foundation of the world,” using a word *proorisaj* whose root meaning is “to decide before hand” and which is used in the New

²⁴ Leslie James Crawford, “Ephesians 1:3-4 and the Nature of Election,” in *TMSJ* 11/1 (Spring 2000) 75-91 (77). Surprisingly, arguing from the same passage, Crawford arrived at a different conclusion thanks to his reading of the “in Christ” formula in the benediction.

²⁵ Shogren, “Election,” p. 442

Testament with reference to God's eternal decrees.²⁶ In the Ephesians' context, *proorisaí* occurs as a participle qualifying the election verb previously stated. It specifies the action of God in eternity whereby He has fixed in advance the destiny of the elect. The nature of this destiny is specified by the phrase "adopted as sons." By this act of election, the elect has been taken into God's family and are bestowed with the family name and inheritance, as if they were natural sons.²⁷

Election, therefore, is not some divine afterthought but part of an 'eternal purpose.' God not only elects before the foundation of the world; He is and remains the electing God when His grace is poured out, when sins are forgiven, when revelation opens the eyes of the human mind.²⁸ Thus, election is eschatologically oriented. It is an event which is still being fulfilled.

Paul identifies the object of this election as "us" (*hēmeis*). This is probably with reference to Christians in general, to whom the Ephesians now belong. Given the context and what we know of election as a divine act, there is no indication of any preconditions related to their election. It is according to the good pleasure of God's will (Eph 1:5); not for the sake of anything foreseen in the elect.²⁹ In this way Paul reiterates the biblically rooted conviction of the gratuity of God's election. In other words, God chooses not for the sake of any good or excellence found in the elect, but instead he chooses out of love. He also chooses to make the elect holy, making holiness the great end and design of election. But he does not choose because he foresaw that the elect would be holy; rather he chooses because he is determined to make the elect holy and blameless before him (Eph 1:4).³⁰

Paul then indicates that the "us" are blessed "in Christ" and destined to be God's children "through Christ." The phrase "in Christ" also signals a dimension of the election theology that is very

²⁶ Leslie C. Allen, "The Old Testament Background of [*pro*] *orisaí* in the New Testament," *New Testament Studies* 17 (October 1970), 104-108

²⁷ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 2307.

²⁸ Barth, *Ephesians*, p. 106.

²⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 2307

³⁰ Crawford, "Ephesians 1:3-4" observes that for Paul, God is here dealing with humanity in its fallen condition, which means the object of election are unbelievers, who will become believers on account of their election (see pp. 82-83).

relevant to our discussion: namely its corporate nature. This phrase is a typically Pauline, occurring mostly in his letters of all New Testament writings. It is especially frequent in Ephesians and more so in chapter 1. In 1:3-14 alone, it is found no less than eleven times. Many interpretations have been given to this phrase, ranging from the mythical, mystical, existential, sacramental, local, historical and eschatological through juridical and ecclesiastical. As Barth rightly remarks: “The impossibility of elaborating a final definition of the meaning of “in Christ” may have a simple cause: namely that Paul used the formula in more than one sense.”³¹

In the Ephesians’ context, the phrase denotes the relationship formed between God and God’s people, rather than a bond established by faith or sacraments between Christ and individuals only. If God is the one who elects and who blesses, Christ is the agent of God’s economy, the one in and through whom God effects this economy of salvation. Paul repeatedly speaks of what God has done “in” or “through” Christ. First, in Christ God blessed them and chose them before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless; and through Christ, God destined them for adoption as his children (1:3-6). Second, in Christ they have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of trespasses. In Christ God has made known the mystery of His will, a plan for the fullness of time, to gather all things in Christ (1:7-10). Thirdly, in Christ believers have obtained an inheritance in accordance with God’s purpose, and in Christ they have heard the gospel and been sealed with the Spirit, the pledge of their inheritance (1:11-14).³²

This way of understanding the “in Christ” phrase saves Paul from the accusation of fatalism or determinism. If the person of Jesus Christ is the prime object and subject, the revealed secret and instrument of God’s election in the new dispensation, and if he represents all those elected, then all notions of a fixed will, testament, plan and program of God are not only inadequate but contrary to the sense of Ephesians 1. Election does not consist of the creation of a scheme which divides humanity into two opposite groups: the elected

³¹ Barth, *Ephesians*, 69.

³² Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Theology: Exploring Diversity and Unity* (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 230

and the rejected. Much more is it that person-to-person relationship of love which exists in the relationship between God and His Son and is revealed by the events that manifest this relationship. God's election is not an absolute decree. It is relative to the Son, his incarnation, passion, death and resurrection.

The Church is the historical continuation of Christ in and through the community of those who believe in him, and who recognize him explicitly as the mediator of salvation in a profession of faith. If the period before Christ was already encompassed by God's salvific will and by his self-communication and election unto salvation, then the period after Christ, albeit the period of the Church, is all the more encompassed by and bears the stamp of an explicit profession and knowledge of the fact that this Jesus Christ is the salvation of the world and that in him God has offered himself to the world irrevocably.³³

When Paul, therefore, speaks of God's election of the elect "in Christ", he employs the phrase to describe (a) God's election before the foundation of the world, (b) God's saving and revealing action in the time of fulfillment, and (c) God's present manifestation and claim in the congregation. The divine economy – election – then, begins with God's plan, finds its initial fulfillment in Christ's redemptive death, is presently experienced through the power of the Spirit (the pledge of their future inheritance), and will be brought to completion when every thing in heaven and on earth is gathered in and finds its unity in Christ. Election, therefore, is used here to designate God's call 'in Christ' of Gentiles as well as Jews. It is God's election of the Church as the People of God. Election "in Christ", therefore, is synonymous with election of God's people in the Church. Only as members of the Church, as People of God, do individuals share in the benefits of God's gracious choice.

No doubt Paul draws on the Hebrew Scripture in articulating his views on election. But while the Old Testament passages proclaiming election show a necessary particularistic or nationalistic slant in favour of the patriarchs and their physical descendants, Paul's notion of election in Ephesians has a universal ring. Not only Israel but the

³³ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, Translated by William V. Dych (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 322.

nations too are included in God's love.³⁴ Though in form and substance, the benediction of Ephesians 1 closely resembles contemporary Jewish *berakah* – a thanksgiving blessing that celebrates the blessings God has bestowed upon his people – the introduction of the words “in Christ” and the emphasis laid on Christ relationship to God and humanity reveal the unique character of this Christian proclamation of eternal election.³⁵

Beyond Ephesians: The Corporate Election of the Church

In fine, the manner in which Ephesians presents the election idea can be summarised as follows: in Christ, before the foundation of the world, God chose and elected those who now finds themselves in the Church. The choice is entirely at God's loving initiative with salvation as the ultimate aim of His plan. This salvation is centered on Christ who plays a mediating role of bringing the whole strayed humanity back to God. Christ achieved this by his death and resurrection; and in his name salvation is now being offered to Jews and Gentiles alike through the ministry of Paul.

The Church is the body of this Christ, the visible and tangible presence of Christ in the universe. Through baptism individual Christians are incorporated into this community and participate in the saving mystery of Christ's death, resurrection and exaltation and become members of Christ's body. Of course, the pilgrim People of God of the New Covenant is not the ultimate goal of election. Its end is the Kingdom of God, which has been begun by God himself on earth, and which is to be further extended until it is brought to perfection by Him at the eschaton.³⁶ The Church therefore is neither the first nor the last thing. She does not exist for her own sake; nor is she chosen for her own sake. Rather she is the elect by virtue of her mission and vocation: namely, to be a historical sign and instrument of salvation. God's economy of salvation will be completed when all things are finally gathered in Christ, in the Church.

³⁴ Barth, *Ephesians*, 106.

³⁵ Barth, *Ephesians*, 108-9.

³⁶ Maximilian H. Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 81.

The nature of election in Ephesians 1 therefore involves a subtle interplay of Christology and ecclesiology. On the one hand, the goal of God’s economy – His election – is to gather all things in Christ. On the other, the Church plays a vital role in this consummation since it is the body of Christ, the fullness of the one who is the head of all things. For Ephesians, to be in the Church is to be in Christ, and to be in Christ is to be in the Church.³⁷

The election theme has been elaborately developed and discussed in magisterial documents, especially in the Dogmatic Constitution in the Church, *Lumen gentium* of the Vatican II Council. As a matter of fact, the central concern that God’s call always signifies convocation of a community of salvation runs through the second chapter of *Lumen gentium*. In the words of the Council Fathers:

God... does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased him to bring men together as one people.... He therefore chose the race of Israel as a people unto himself. With it he sets up a covenant.³⁸

The Council Fathers were quick to add that the call of Israel, however, as the first chosen People of God, is the prefiguration of the New Covenant, which Christ established “in his blood” and which constitutes the New Testament People of God. This group is no longer restricted to a single nation or to one land, but rather embodies the universality of salvation for all humanity. In their own words:

All these things, however, were done by way of preparation and as a figure of that new and perfect covenant, which was to be ratified in Christ, and of that fuller revelation which was to be given through the Word of God himself made flesh.... Christ instituted this new covenant, the new covenant that is to say, in his blood (cf. 1 Cor 11:25).³⁹

According to *Lumen gentium*, therefore, the Church is connected within the history of salvation with the Old Testament covenant

³⁷ Matera, *New Testament Theology*, 231.

³⁸ *Lumen gentium*, 9. Citations from the documents of Vatican Council II are from Austin Flannery (gen. ed.), *Vatican Council II: Vol. I: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1988 rev. ed.)

³⁹ LG, 9.

people, from whom the universality of the divine salvific will was, however, still hidden. But the Church as the new People of God is not just a continuation of old Israel without intensification or interruption. Its novelty is in the fact that “Christ won it as his possession through his death on the cross, blessed it with his Spirit, and unified it through the establishment of visible social bonds and promised that he would remain with it always.”⁴⁰ As the head of the new covenant people, Christ by sending his disciples to all nations (cf. Matt 28:16-20) fulfilled the eschatological hopes of the patriarchs and the prophets and [called] together a people made up of Jews and Gentiles, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit. This was to be the new People of God.⁴¹ The Church as the “People of God” thus becomes the fundamental concept on the basis of which the mystery of the Church as the new elect can be grasped.

⁴⁰ Heim, *Joseph Ratzinger*, 82.

⁴¹ LG 9.