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**‘Did I not choose you, the twelve?  
Yet one of you is a devil’ (John 6:70):  
Election in John’s Gospel**

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The verb “to choose” (eklegomai) is used five times in the Gospel of John<sup>3</sup> In each of these cases the context has to do with the fact that Jesus has chosen the disciples; they are his. In several places in the Gospel, Jesus makes it clear in his discourse that to belong to him is to be in a place of security and wellbeing as far as one’s spiritual life and eternal destiny is concerned. Whoever comes to Jesus as his sheep, trusting and believing in him, will never be hungry or thirsty, will not be driven away nor lost, and remains safe within the grasp not only of the Son but the Father as well (John 6:35-40; 10:28-30).

Nevertheless, on the first occasion in which the verb “to choose” is found, a degree of ambiguity surrounds the status of those who believe in Jesus in terms of their continuing relationship with him. There is some uncertainty proffered by the flow of the narrative and the words of Jesus over the issues of the “eternal security” of

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<sup>3</sup> See John 6:70; 13:18; 15:16 (2x); 15:19. Some manuscripts have the word “chosen” used as a gerund (“the chosen”) or adjectively (“the chosen son”) at John 1:34; but these are by no means widely attested readings.

believers, and their “final perseverance” (to use the traditional theological terminology).<sup>4</sup>

The context is an occasion when many of Jesus’ disciples find his teaching hard to accept (John 6:60-71), and as a consequence many no longer remain his disciples. Jesus, therefore, asks the twelve whether they too would wish to leave him. The form of the question suggests that Jesus expects a negative answer. Commentators, however, are divided over whether Jesus asks the question in the confidence that the twelve disciples will successfully resist the temptation to abandon Jesus, or whether he asks it in a tone that suggests he is uncertain of their likely response.<sup>5</sup>

When Peter, acting as spokesman for them all, affirms their allegiance, Jesus’ response is hardly encouraging. ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve?’ he asks. ‘Yet one of you is a devil’ (6:70).<sup>6</sup> The narrator is quick to point out that Jesus is referring to Judas Iscariot, who will betray Jesus. Nevertheless, at this point in the story, this response serves to throw doubt upon the faithfulness of all the disciples including Peter whom the reader will learn is to deny knowing Jesus (an act of which Jesus has foreknowledge).

I suggest that the evangelist tells the story of Jesus and the disciples in such a way as to create a tension between the two aspects of what it means to believe in Jesus. On the one hand, there is the call of Christ, who chooses his disciples (6:70; 15:16), who calls his sheep by name and leads them, in the sure knowledge that he can keep them safe (10:27-28); and who can surely raise up those to whom he has the right to give life (5: 21, 25-29; cf. 6:39, 40). On the other hand, there is the call to abide in Jesus, and the possibility that those who do not remain firmly rooted and attached to Jesus, will fail at the end to achieve eternal life.

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the term, see O’Neill. “Final Perseverance,” in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* eds. Richardson and Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1983), 213. See also Moltmann. “Perseverance,” in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* eds. Richardson and Bowden; London: SCM Press, 1983), 441-42.

<sup>5</sup> Carson and Morris think the former, see Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 303, Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 344. Barrett and Beasley-Murray the latter, see Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John: An Introduction with Commentary and Notes on the Greek Text* (London: SPCK, 1978), 306, Beasley-Murray, *John* (Waco: Word Books, 1987), 97, who speaks of the pathos of the statement ‘which should be retained’.

<sup>6</sup> All biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

It is incumbent upon the believer to remain in a committed and faithful relationship with Jesus. This point is made not only by the story of two disciples, Peter and Judas Iscariot, to whom we shall return, but also in the teaching of Jesus. The parable of the vine and the branches in John 15: 1- 8 makes this point clearly. The branches, in order to be fruitful, must remain in the vine (15:4, 5). Nor is it possible to remain as fruitless branch on the vine (5:2a). Indeed, fruitlessness and not abiding in the vine bring the same result. In fact, it would seem that not abiding in Christ is the precipitating cause for removal from the vine, whereupon one dries up, withers, and is fit for nothing but the fire (15:6).

Earlier in the Gospel Jesus challenges the many Jews who believe in him with these words: ‘If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free’ (John 8:31, 32). To be true disciples, to enjoy true freedom in Christ is conditional upon continued faithfulness to Jesus’ word. In fact, Christ’s act of choosing his own is for a purpose: it is that they should bear fruit that will last (15:16) and that they should keep his commandments and his word; and this is the way to abide in his love (14:23, 24; 15:9, 10).

The story of two disciples in the Gospel illustrate the tension that exists between the choice of God/Jesus and the freedom of those chosen to remain in relationship with God/Jesus or to depart that relationship. The story of Peter is particularly instructive as it shows both the call of Jesus, and the challenge to “remain” a disciple. Peter first enters the story when he is brought to Jesus by his brother, Andrew, who informs Peter that “we have found the Messiah” (John 1: 40-41). What Jesus says to Peter is interesting. He looks at Peter (who at this point is called Simon) and says: ‘You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Cephas.’ (1:42). In terms of the development of the story, I suggest that this signals two things: first that Peter is to be one of Jesus’ sheep, whom Jesus calls by name, whom Jesus knows, and who will follow Jesus (10: 3b, 14, 27). Second, that Peter’s story is one of a journey to true discipleship: a discipleship that he only truly takes up after the resurrection when he

is called upon to reaffirm his love for Jesus and is commissioned for service (21:15-19).<sup>7</sup>

Peter next appears in the passage to which I have already referred, that is, John 6: 66-71. Here Peter affirms his, and all the disciples, allegiance to Jesus when Jesus asks whether they also wish to abandon him, as have many other disciples. ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God’, Peter replies (6:68, 69). It would be difficult to provide a more assured statement of allegiance and of belief than this: it is especially strengthened by the two verbs, to believe and to know (pepist uekamen kai egnwkamen).

Yet, Jesus does not commend Peter: rather he issues an enigmatic statement about one of the twelve being “a devil”.<sup>8</sup> Despite the narrator’s comment that this statement referred to Judas (a comment driven by his presentation of the character of Judas, and his theological understanding of the nature of Jesus), the context – and subsequent development of the story – serves to allow an aura of doubt to hang in the air as to the ability of even Peter to persevere in this faith. After all, Jesus has just asked the disciples if they wish to abandon him. Peter’s strong statement of allegiance notwithstanding, Jesus chooses to focus on the potential that exist within the twelve for opposition, if not apostasy.

The next couple of direct interchanges between Jesus and Peter are also tinged with awkwardness and uncertainty over Peter’s commitment and ability to be faithful. In the context of a last meal with his disciples, Jesus undertakes to wash his disciples’ feet. When his turn comes, Peter at first vehemently opposes Jesus washing his feet (13:8) only to be told by Jesus that unless Jesus washes him, he can have no “share” with Jesus. Peter, ever the impetuous one, then offers Jesus the opportunity to wash not just his feet, but his hands and head as well. Jesus replies by saying that when one has bathed, one then only need have one’s feet washed. This exchange is a

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<sup>7</sup> I have argued elsewhere that John 1:42 echoes the renaming of Jacob in Gen. 35:10; see Tovey, “Stone of Witness and Stone of Revelation: an Exploration of Inter-textual Resonance in John 1:35-51,” *Colloquium* 38, no. 1 (2006).

<sup>8</sup> Commentators debate the relationship between this pericope and the accounts of Peter’s confession in the Synoptic Gospels, and perhaps especially Matthew’s account where Jesus commends Peter for his divinely given insight (see Matthew 16:13-20; cf. Mark 8:27-33; Luke 9:18-22). I wish to focus, however, upon the dynamic of this pericope within John’s Gospel itself.

metaphorical way of making the point that a relationship of belonging to Jesus brings one spiritual cleansing; and the use of the verb “to be clean” (at 13:10 in the Greek the adverbial form is used: *kaqaros*, *kaqaroi*) creates a link with Jesus’ talk about “pruning” (“cleaning”) in 15: 2, 3 (where the verb is used: *kaqarei*, and the plural adverb, *kaqaroi*). But Jesus’ exchange with Peter ends on an ominous note: ‘You are clean, though not all of you’ (13:10b). The reader is not told explicitly by the narrator to whom Jesus refers, though the narrator assures the reader that Jesus knows of whom he speaks (we shall explore the reason for this below).

In the next direct exchange that Jesus has with Peter (13:36-38), Peter affirms his readiness to lay down his life for Jesus. Jesus, however, questions this and flatly states that before cock crow, Peter will have denied Jesus three times. This, indeed, is how things turn out. The account of Peter’s denial (18:15-27) is sandwiched around Jesus’ bold and straightforward defence of his teaching and the invitation to Annas (acting in the place of Caiaphas, the high priest) to check with those who have heard his teaching (18:19-24). As the narrator states that Annas is questioning Jesus about his disciples and his teaching (18:19), there is irony in the fact that the one disciple who has so strongly affirmed both his allegiance to Jesus and his readiness to remain loyal until death is out in the courtyard flatly denying all knowledge of Jesus.

For our current purposes, we may pass directly to Jesus’ last encounter with Peter on the shores of “the sea of Tiberias” in John 21.<sup>9</sup> Here, following a breakfast, Jesus puts to Peter three times the question: ‘Do you love me?’. This three-fold questioning of Peter’s love for Jesus is widely seen as a narrative counterpoint to the three-fold denial of Jesus by Peter earlier in the story. Peter, the narrator informs the reader, is hurt by this three-fold question, and knows that he can only appeal to Jesus’ knowledge of him, and humbly affirm that he does love Jesus. Each response by Peter is met with a commission from Jesus: Peter is to tend to Christ’s flock, an under-shepherd to the Good Shepherd.

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<sup>9</sup> Anyone interested in a fuller account of Peter’s characterisation as I read it, may refer to Tovey, *Jesus, Story of God: John’s Story of Jesus* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2007), 123-31. I argue for the unity of the Gospel, and see John 21 as an integral part of the whole story, see pp. 66-7; and Tovey, *Narrative Art and Act in the Fourth Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 110-12.

But it is what Jesus says next that is important to note for our theme. First, Jesus tells Peter that he will indeed lay down his life in his service of Jesus (Jesus now takes up Peter's offer of 13:37, but, ironically, informs Peter that he will not willingly go to his death!). Then Jesus issues Peter again with a call to discipleship: "Follow me" (21:19). Indeed, when Peter is immediately taken up with curiosity over the fate of the beloved disciple, Jesus repeats this command. It is of no concern to Peter what Jesus' plans are for beloved disciple: Peter is simply called to faithful discipleship. Jesus' last words to Peter, then, are: 'Follow me' (21:22).

It is important to note this. It is not enough that Jesus has chosen Peter, and called him by name. It is not enough that Peter, despite a question mark over his faithfulness throughout the story, remains one of Jesus' "own" and is rehabilitated to a position of authority and leadership over Jesus' "sheep". Peter must continue to heed and to hold to Jesus' command: "Follow me". Peter must himself continue to "remain", to abide in the vine, to remain in the word of Jesus.

Judas represents the disciple who fails to remain in Jesus' word: Judas is like the branch that is cut off and withers (15: 6; it is perhaps part of the evangelist's rhetorical purpose that Judas has departed on his mission of betrayal before Jesus speaks these words). The scene in which Judas departs to set in motion his treacherous plan ends in deep symbolism. When Judas leaves the dinner party, Satan having entered into him (13:27), he departs into the night. Those who do evil are people of darkness, and avoid coming to the light (John 3:19, 20).

When Judas next appears, he comes in company with a detachment of soldiers, and police from the chief priests and Pharisees (18:3). The evangelist adopts an interesting narrative strategy at this point, as he has the narrator clearly place Judas in the company of those who oppose Jesus and have come to arrest him. When the company arrive, Jesus goes forward and asks them whom they are looking for. When they say, "Jesus of Nazareth", he replies, "I am he" (the Greek *egw eimi* reminds the reader of the divine "I am"). At this point, the narrator states that Judas is standing with the arresting party (18:5b). It is as if the evangelist wishes to underline the point that Judas has gone over to the other side, as it were. Judas stands against Jesus, ranged alongside his enemies. The narrator does not explicitly say whether Judas also falls to the ground with the others in the

arresting party when Jesus says, “I am he”; but clearly that is an inference that may be taken.

When Jesus again asks whom they seek, and receives the same answer, he says, ‘I told you that I am he. So if you are looking for me, let these men go’ (18:8). He is referring to his disciples: but, the reader may assume, this now does not include Judas. So when the narrator immediately comments that ‘This was to fulfil the word that he had spoken, “I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me” (18:9), the reader knows that Judas is not one of Jesus’ “own” whom the Father has given Jesus. Indeed, this reminder of Jesus’ words, must surely (the reader may again assume) refer back to Jesus’ words in the prayer of John 17, when he speaks of having protected the disciples for whom he prays (Judas being absent): ‘I guarded them, and not one of them was lost except the one destined to be lost, so that the scripture might be fulfilled’ (17:12b).

This raises an important point in regards of the evangelist’s treatment of Judas in this Gospel. He invariably makes sure that the reader knows that Judas was the one who betrayed Jesus (see John 6: 71; 12:4), even when the context might suggest that this reminder is unnecessary, as in 18: 5b. Indeed, when the narrator has occasion to mention another Judas, it is made clear that this is not Judas Iscariot (14:22).<sup>10</sup> He also takes the opportunity, in the story where Mary of Bethany anoints Jesus feet with perfume, to blacken Judas’ name, and to make the point that he was a thief (12: 6).

But, most importantly, the evangelist guards against any sense that Jesus is taken by surprise by the betrayal of Judas, or that this falls outside of his knowledge. When Jesus counters Peter’s statement of allegiance, made in John 6:68, 69, with the ominous statement that one of the twelve is “a devil”, the narrator states that he was speaking of Judas Iscariot. We might take this simply as a comment by the narrator, made from hindsight. However when, shortly before this, many of his disciples begin to struggle to accept Jesus’ teaching, Jesus states that there are among them those who do not believe. The narrator then states that ‘Jesus knew from the first who were the ones

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<sup>10</sup> This, of course, may be so that the reader does not lose sight of the fact that Judas Iscariot has departed the band of disciples, and is no longer with them.



that did not believe, and who was the one that would betray him' (6:64).

Later in the story, the narrator makes it all too clear that Jesus knows the identity of the betrayer. When Jesus washes the disciples' feet, and tells Peter that they are clean, but not all of them, the narrator states the he said this because he knew who would betray him (13:11). Shortly thereafter Jesus speaks about the fact that one of the disciples will betray him. The disciples are perplexed: they do not know of whom Jesus is speaking, but when the beloved disciple (prompted by Peter) asks Jesus who it is, Jesus says it is the one to whom he will give a piece of bread once he has dipped it in the dish. Thereupon Jesus dips the bread in the dish and gives it to Judas (13:26). It is at this point, the narrator informs the reader, that Satan enters into Judas; though he has earlier stated that 'the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas son of Simon Iscariot to betray [Jesus]' (13:2). In order to underline the fact that none of this takes place without Jesus' knowledge and understanding, the evangelist has Jesus say to Judas after the exchange of bread, 'Do quickly what you are going to do'.

This foreknowledge of Jesus is linked with statements that this happens in fulfillment of scripture (17:12). Hence, there is a sense of the divine inevitability of Judas actions. Whether we should take this as evidence that the evangelist holds to some sort of doctrine of predestination is, perhaps, a moot point. I suggest that it arises out of the evangelist's theological rationale of the identity of Jesus. If Jesus and God (the Father) are one (10:30), and if – as any Jew of the first-century must surely have believed – nothing can fall outside of the knowledge, will and purpose of God, then Jesus must surely be endowed with the same divine foreknowledge. This logic is a function not so much of a doctrine of predestination, as of an understanding of the character and nature of God.

Indeed, this logic is brought out by Jesus himself, precisely in the context of speaking about the betrayer. After Jesus has washed the disciples' feet and before he begins to speak openly about the fact that one of the twelve will betray him, Jesus says this (in the context of doing the will of the "Master"): 'I am not speaking of all of you: I know whom I have chosen. But it is to fulfill the scripture, "The one who ate my bread has lifted his heel against me". I tell you this now,



before it occurs, so that when it does occur, you may believe *that I am he*' (13: 18, 19; emphasis mine; in the Greek it is *egw eimi*). Jesus' foreknowledge arises directly out of the fact that he is on a par with God (as the narrative has continually made plain).

How are we to understand the tension that appears to exist in this Gospel between Jesus' choice of his disciples, and his foreknowledge of those who will believe and those who will fall away, with the sense that it yet remains incumbent upon disciples (believers) to remain faithful to Jesus, to abide in him and to continue to follow. Some may not do this: witness those who fall away in John 6: 60-66; or who – though said to believe – fall into bitter and finally murderous dispute with Jesus (8:31-59). Judas, amongst the twelve, represents the fact that even those most closely associated with Jesus may in the end fall away. Others, like Peter, who fail in their capability to “abide”, who yet remain faithful, nevertheless hear as the final word the command to follow.

In a sense, when taken as a whole story, this Gospel is an extended illustration of the saying quoted in 2 Tim. 2:11-13: ‘If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he will also deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.’ Perhaps, as an aside, it should come as no surprise that the writer of 1 John (whether or not the same author as that for the Gospel), should conclude a letter so taken up with issues of belief and non-believe, fidelity and apostasy, with the warning: ‘Little children, keep yourselves from idols’ (1 John 5:21).

For the writer of John's Gospel, the “eternal security” of the believer and “final perseverance” are two sides of the same coin. In much of the discourse of Jesus and in the story that the evangelist tells there is the exhortation (implicit and explicit) to remain rooted in Jesus. Not only is there a choice to be made with regards to belief in Jesus; there is also an imperative to continue to believe, to remain connected to the vine, to continue to hear the voice of the Shepherd and to follow.

However, for those who do choose to believe, and who remain in a loving, trusting, faithful relationship with Jesus, there is an unshakeable certainty. Not only will those who come to Jesus never be driven away (6:37), but they will remain safe within the grasp of

Jesus, and his Father (10:28, 29) Indeed, for the evangelist, this truth is so certain, so unshakeable, that eternal life is something that begins right from the moment of belief in Jesus. Those who look to the “lifted-up” Son of Man have eternal life (3:14,15); indeed, anyone who hears the word of Jesus and believes in him who sent him has eternal life, ‘and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life’ (5:24).

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