

An Exegetical Abstract Study of God's Foreknowledge

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Introduction

Traditionally, the debate over the meaning of God's foreknowledge is a consequence of the debate between Calvinists and Arminians over predestination, particularly as it relates to the doctrine of election. For example, Calvinists hold to the position that God's foreknowledge is causative, as W. Robert Cook explains:

In Biblical usage, the two concepts [foreknowledge and predestination] are sequential only in that foreknowledge points to initiating cause, namely, God's love in His choice, while predestination points to the willing act which determines the destiny or outcome.¹

Arminians, on the other hand, view God's foreknowledge as prescience, akin to His omniscience. In relating foreknowledge to election, one Arminian author states:

[H]aving set forth these conditions for being in Christ, God foreknows from the beginning who will and who will not meet them. Those whom He foresees as meeting them are predestined to salvation.²

Therefore, according to the Arminian doctrine, foreknowledge is simply God's knowing future events apart from His having a direct causative relationship to them.

Grammatical Analysis

The Greek words translated "foreknow" and "foreknowledge" are the verb *proginoskō* (προγινωσκω) and the noun *prognosis* (προγνωσις). The verb basically means, "to know beforehand" or "to know in advance."³

The Septuagint uses these words apart from any Hebrew equivalent. The verb is attested three times (Wisdom 6:13, 8:8, 18:6), while the noun is used only twice (Judith 9:6, 11:19).

¹W. Robert Cook, *The Christian Faith: Systematic Theology in Outline Form*.

²Jack W. Cottrell, "Conditional Election" in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. Clark H. Pinnock (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975). 61.

³Cf. Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, *A Greek - English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*.

While Septuagint usage does allow for prescience when used of inanimate objects (Wisdom 6:13), when used of God, however, the word is clearly connected with His sovereign decree:

"Yea what things Thou didst determine were ready at hand, and said, Lo we are here: for all Thy ways are prepared, and Thy judgments are in Thy foreknowledge." (Judith 9:6)

Biblical Analysis

The verb *proginoskō* is used five times in the New Testament (Romans 8:29, 11:2; Acts 26:5; 1 Peter 1:20; 2 Peter 3:17). The noun *prognosis* is attested twice (Acts 2:23; 1 Peter 1:2).

As we've seen in the Septuagint, the New Testament also associates foreknowledge with God's sovereign decree:

"For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren." (Romans 8:29, NASB)

Another example is Romans 11:2, a text that references the people of Israel whom God "foreknew." It is obvious from the context that this foreknowledge transcends mere prescience.

Further examples include Acts 26:5, where the Apostle Paul, in his defense before Festus and Agrippa, reflects on his life and the fact that all the Jews have "known him" (*proginoskō*) for a long time. In other words, the Jews have a direct, personal knowledge of him.

In two verses that clearly connect foreknowledge with divine causation, Acts 2:23 and 1 Peter 1:20 relate God's *prognosis* to person and work of Christ. As Cook observes:

God not only knew ahead of time that Christ would be the Lamb (a concept that is self-evident and tautological), He determined it. No other interpretation . . . makes sense. [*op cit.*]

The second passage, 1 Peter 1:2, refers to "God's elect . . . who have been chosen" (v. 1) "according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit." Commenting on this verse, C. Samuel Storms writes:

The first thing that strikes me about the Arminian interpretation of this verse is the utter absence of any reference to faith or free-will as that which God allegedly foreknows or foresees in men.⁴

Storms goes on to say:

Thus to "foreknow" on God's part means to "forelove". That God foreknew us is another way of saying that He set His gracious and merciful regard upon us, that He knew us from eternity past with a sovereign and distinguishing delight.⁵

⁴C. Samuel Storms, *Chosen for Life: An Introductory Guide to the Doctrine of Divine Election* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1987).

⁵Ibid.

It is significant in this regard that the Greek word for "knowledge," *gnosis*, has a linguistic counterpart in the Hebrew noun *yada* (יָדָע) which may contextually refer to an experiential or intimate knowledge. For example, it is used of the sexual union (Genesis 4:1, 19:8), of a personal acquaintance (Genesis 29:5; Exodus 1:8), of knowing good from evil (Genesis 3:5,22), and of knowing the true God (1 Samuel 2:12 - 3:7; Jeremiah 3:22). That nuance carries over into the compounded *prognosis* and *proginoskō*. In other words, depending on the context, the fore-*knowledge* of the Greek New Testament may refer to the same kind of intimate *knowing* found in the Old Testament Hebrew word *yada*.

Examples abound. In Matthew 1:25, the statement "he [Joseph] kept her [Mary] a virgin" is literally "he knew her not" (*epinōskēn*). In Philippians 3:10, Paul states that his foremost desire in life is to "know" (*ginoskō*) Christ. Romans 11:2 tells us that "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew" (*proginoskō*).

I conclude, therefore, that the word "foreknow" carries a much broader possibility of meanings than mere omniscience. In those contexts which speak of God's electing or predestinating, the idea of personal causation out of personal love is present. In that regard, as it relates to God's foreknowledge of persons, to *foreknow* is to *forelove* with causation.⁶

Theological Analysis

In his classic work, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, reformed scholar Loraine Boettner points out that what God foreknows is by definition foreordained:

What God foreknows must, in the very nature of the case, be as fixed and certain as what is foreordained; and if one is inconsistent with the free agency of man, the other is also. Foreordination renders the events certain, while foreknowledge presupposes that they are certain.

If all future events are truly foreknown to God by virtue of His omniscience, those events are fixed and immutable. In other words, that which God knows will occur, will occur! The irrefutable logic of this proposition has led some to deny God's absolute omniscience altogether resulting in the heretical doctrine of "open theism."

Millard Erickson expands upon the idea that what is foreknown is foreordained and relates it to human freedom:

It should be noted that if certainty of outcome is inconsistent with freedom, divine foreknowledge, as the Arminian understands that term, presents as much difficulty for human freedom as does divine foreordination. For if God knows what I will do, it must be certain that I am going to do it. If it were not certain, God could not know it; He might be mistaken (I might act differently from what He expects). But if what I will do is certain, then surely I will do it, whether or not I know what I will do. It will happen! But am I then free? In the view of those whose definition of freedom entails the implication that it cannot be certain that a particular

⁶The object of God's foreknowledge is always persons and never actions or decisions (as free-will theists contend).

event will occur, presumably I am not free. In their view, divine foreknowledge is just as incompatible with human freedom as is divine foreordination.⁷

Once again, note the use of the word foreknowledge in connection with the crucifixion of Christ. According to Acts 2:23 and 1 Peter 1:20, He was "crucified according to the foreknowledge of God." It would be absurd to interpret foreknowledge, in this context, to mean that God just "looked ahead and saw what was going to happen." As it relates to the coming of Christ to die for the sin of the world, God's foreknowledge is clearly personal and causative.

Applicational Analysis

In the final analysis we ask the question, "What difference does it make?" Does it matter what we think about God's foreknowledge? Here are three reasons why I believe it does matter:

- *God's foreknowledge demonstrates His nature.* To misrepresent God's foreknowledge is to misrepresent His nature. Does the Bible reveal a God who looks down the corridors of time to learn what will happen (and act accordingly) as in process theology? Or is He an omnipotent, sovereign God who does as He pleases, One whose will cannot be frustrated (Daniel 4:35)?
- *God's foreknowledge demonstrates His eternal love.* In foreknowing the Son (1 Peter 1:20) the Father demonstrates His eternal love and purpose for Him. In a similar fashion, God demonstrates His eternal love and purpose for believers whom He similarly "foreknew" (Romans 8:29).
- *God's foreknowledge demonstrates His unique sovereignty.* God's foreknowledge differentiates His sovereignty, which is personal, from the hard determinism of fatalism, which is not. The Triune God of the Bible does not impersonally ordain future events like a hardened dictator. All of His perfections (love, mercy, grace, omnipotence, holiness, etc.) work together as He personally orchestrates His predetermined plan, "working all things according to the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11).

⁷Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 1986).