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The Imagery of Sovereignty in the Gospel of John

David Ritsema

Pastor, Woodlawn Baptist Church, Austin, TX, USA ¹

Introduction

A. Foreknowledge and the Knowledge of Jesus

B. Election and the Election of Jesus

John 6:35-47

John 10:26

C. Predestination and the Fulfillment of Jesus

“Fulfillment”

“My Time”

Summary

Tension between Sovereignty and Freedom

“Abide in Me”

Conclusion

Introduction

Wading into the waters of one of the perennial problems of Christianity, this paper takes a fresh look at divine sovereignty by examining the imagery of sovereignty in the Gospel of John.² The tension between divine sovereignty and human freedom has been explained by David and Randall Basinger who summarize the tension as the belief held by Christians where on the one hand:

God made us morally responsible beings with the ability to make meaningful moral decisions. ... On the other hand, Christians also believe that God has sovereign control over all earthly affairs.³

¹ See www.WoodlawnBC.org.

² J. I. Packer calls these two categories God as king and God as judge, respectively; see *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1961), 11-17.

³ David Basinger and Randall Basinger, editors, *Predestination and Freewill: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 7.

The Gospel of John is the “perfect choice” within the New Testament for examining the imagery of sovereignty, because the Gospel preserves the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility.⁴ This paper will identify passages in the Gospel of John which utilize language associated with divine sovereignty including foreknowledge, election, and predestination. The paper will conclude with an evaluation of the relationship between human freedom and divine sovereignty in the Gospel.

A. Foreknowledge and the Knowledge of Jesus

The notion of God’s sovereignty includes his ability to know the future. The Bible often describes God’s ability to know things in advance. This is true in the Gospel of John where Jesus is portrayed as having knowledge of things before they happen, of people whom he has never met, and even thoughts from inside of people’s minds.

The word “know” occurs 52 times (in Greek γινώσκω) and 84 additional times (in Greek οἶδα) in the Gospel of John. The Gospel describes Jesus having a knowledge which comes from God (i.e. divine knowledge). In John 1, Jesus is the one who was with the Father in the beginning and the one who reveals the Father to the world (cf. 1:18; 7:28-29; 15:15; 17:23-26), therefore he knows his mission having received this information directly from God (cf. John 4:32; 6:42; 7:28-29; 8:14; 8:19, 32, 37, 52, 55; 9:24, 29-31; 15:21; 16:3).

Furthermore, the Gospel portrays Jesus’ divine knowledge knowing people having never met them previously. Jesus knows Nathaniel though he has not previously met him (1:48). He knows the Samaritan woman again having never met her previously. The fact that she has had five husbands (John 4:16) is known to Jesus and upon his revealing this divine knowledge to the woman she says, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.” (John 4:19; NRSV).

The rest of John’s Gospel shows that this pattern of divine knowledge continues. Jesus is able to know what the Pharisees are thinking in their hearts (cf. John 5:32). Jesus knows the intention of the crowds who sought to make him king by force (6:15). Jesus knows from the beginning Judas will betray him (6:64, 70-71; cf.

⁴ Grant R. Osborne, “Soteriology in the Gospel of John” in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man* edited by Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 243.

18:18). Jesus knows of his upcoming death (8:21-29, esp. 28). Jesus knows “his sheep” (10:4, 14). When it comes time for the betrayal and arrest the Gospel says, “Jesus, knowing all that was to happen to him . . .” (18:4 NRSV). At the crucifixion, Jesus knows “all was now completed” and the “Scripture fulfilled” (19:28). At the end of the Gospel, thrice Peter’s devotion was questioned but finally Peter admits, “Lord, you know all things” (21:17 NRSV).

Throughout the Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as having divine knowledge: reading people’s minds (6:15), reading God’s mind (10:34-36), and even at times knowing events before they will happen (the cross, the denial of Peter, the betrayal of Judas).

All of these examples demonstrate that Jesus is portrayed in the Gospel as one who has (1) divine knowledge from God, (2) divine knowledge which enables him to know people’s thoughts, and (3) divine knowledge of future events before they happen (i.e. foreknowledge). This demonstrates John’s consistent portrayal of Jesus which is coherent with the notion of divine sovereignty in foreknowledge.

B. Election and the Election of Jesus

Vital to the notion of divine sovereignty, especially in Calvinistic schools of thoughts, is the belief that God not only possesses divine foreknowledge but that God’s sovereignty elects (or chooses) the very individuals who will be saved (in some interpretations this includes those who will be damned, i.e. reprobation). In the Gospel of John the Greek word for “election” (Greek ἐκλεκτος) does not occur in the Gospel of John, the term “choose” (Greek κλέγομαι) does occur in John 6:70 and 15:16 (cf. 13:18; 15:19) for the choosing of the Twelve (minus Judas Iscariot). In John 5-11, several passages allude to the notion of divine election and have become favorite “proof texts” among some Calvinistic interpreters including: (1) John 6:35-47 where Jesus’ followers are “given” to him by God (also note John 6:30 where the disciples are the “chosen” Twelve), and (2) John 10:26 where the disciples and the followers of Jesus are his sheep.

John 6:35-47

John 6:37, 40 the followers of Jesus as said to be given by the Father (Greek πνεῦ δίδωσιν). John 6:37 has Jesus saying, “All that the Father gives [πνεῦ δίδωσιν] me will come to me.” In 6:40 Jesus

says, “I shall lose none of all that he has given me [πλεύ δέδωκέν], but raise them up at the last day.” Even Arminian interpreters like Grant Osborne have conceded the language of sovereignty and God’s sovereign control is heavily stressed in this passage. Osborne has said of 6:35-47 that the “sovereign control of salvation by God is given greater stress than anywhere else in John.”⁵ However, it should be noted that the sovereign decision of God in choosing those who will follow Jesus does not completely preclude the possibility of human freedom and responsibility. In fact, in 6:36 Jesus specifically indicates that the Jews who reject Jesus are responsible for their own decisions, saying, “But as I told you, you have seen me and still you do not believe.” Furthermore, 6:40 indicates that only those who look to the Son and “believe” (an expression of free will) will be saved. This suggests that God’s sovereignty in election is juxtaposed to human freedom and responsibility.⁶

John 10:26

A common image from the OT to describe the king and even God himself, here in John 10 is used of Jesus. Jesus is portrayed as the Shepherd who sovereignly knows “his” sheep (10:3-4, 14, 16, 27), sovereignly keeps his sheep protected unto eternal life (10:14, 28), sovereignly discerns between those who are his sheep because they have been “given” to him by the Father (10:26-27), and finally rejects those who are not his sheep (10:26). John 10 is a favorite among Calvinistic interpreters who see a strong emphasis on divine sovereignty as Jesus establishes himself as the Good Shepherd.⁷ Pivotal to this section is 10:26. Does 10:26 say that the Jews reject Jesus because they have not been chosen by God or because they have through own free will chosen to reject God and therefore God has rejected them?

⁵ Osborne, 247.

⁶ For discussion about eternal security, the chronology the events in the salvation process, and the meaning of “cast out” and “in” see D. A. Carson who argues for eternal security and Leon Dufour who argues against chronology and that the passage is a chiasm: Carson, *Divine Sovereignty*, 184. John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans , 1955), 196-197; Osborne, 248, n. 13, who sees a progression here – they are not cast out, they are given, they will not be lost, they will be raised at the last day. Election and assurance are working together in this passage. Xavier Léon Dufour, “Trois chiasmes johanniques,” *NTS* 7 (1960-61), 251-53, as in Brown, *John*, 275-56. Osborne disagrees with Brown and Dufour who see verses 36-40 as separate tradition, Osborne, 248, n. 15.

⁷ Osborne, 250.

D. A. Carson has argued that in verse 26, “Jesus does not say that his opponents are not among his sheep because they do not believe, but that they do not believe because they are not among his sheep.”⁸ If Carson’s reading is correct, then the John 10:26 supports divine election regardless of human freedom. Arminian biblical interpreters, however, do not see an unconditional divine election in John 10:26, but instead insist that human free will is preserved for anyone who believes.⁹ H. Marshall has said that “exegetical honesty compels us to ask whether the will of God can be frustrated by human sin”¹⁰ opening the door for apostasy.

The acceptance of Jesus by his sheep and the rejection of Jesus by the Jews is described in John 10:26-30 due to the fact that the Jewish leadership are not Jesus’ sheep. The irony is palpable, the Jewish religious leadership, who were teaching others about religious faith, were themselves’ not believing. However, what was the cause of their unbelief? Was it due to divine election or free will?

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus performs Signs intended to lead to faith (John 20:30-31). However, the very individuals who should believe (i.e. the Jews) reject Jesus. The Gospel of John describes this rejection as part of God’s sovereign plan, but always the Gospel places the blame on “the Jews” themselves. In John 10:26, the Jewish leaders have no “excuse” for not believing in Jesus. Their lack of faith does not “exonerate” them but indict them further. They are responsible for the decisions they have made regarding Jesus and the antecedent of their faith (e.g. unconditional election) is left unanswered. Therefore, this section preserves the perennial tension whereby, “Both divine sovereignty and human responsibility exist side-by-side in the fourth Gospel.”¹¹

⁸ Carson, *Divine Sovereignty*, 190.

⁹ Osborne, 250.

¹⁰ Marshall, *Kept by Power*, 178.

¹¹ Ibid., 41. Howard I. Marshall refers to previous commentators who tended to interpret John 10:27 by reading into the passage conditional, present tenses for the verbs ‘hear’ and ‘follow.’¹² Peterson finds Marshall and Osborne both willing to seriously engage the passage exegetically and he finds this refreshing. Carson agrees with Peterson here. See D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 188-191. Also see D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), esp. 393.

C. Predestination and the Fulfillment of Jesus

The third category of sovereign imagery in the Gospel of John is predestination. The term predestination is not found in the Gospel of John (cf. Rom 8:29, 30; Eph 1:5, 11), but the language of (1) “fulfillment” and (2) “hour” or “time” suggest that events surrounding Jesus’ crucifixion are part of a divinely orchestrated plan. This unmistakable feature of the Gospel of John lends itself toward a predestinarian thrust.

“Fulfillment”

Fourteen times John’s Gospel explicitly quotes from the OT, sometimes using the phrase “in order to fulfill,” which demonstrates the “scriptural, salvation-historical framework” within which the Gospel operates.¹² Scriptures fulfilled in John include the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem (7:42), the arrival of the Spirit as “rivers of water” (7:38), the right of Jesus to claim divinity (10:35), the Triumphant Entry (John 12:12-16; cf. Zech 9:9), the betrayal of Judas (13:18; 17:12), the sparing of the disciples (18:9), the manner of Jesus’ death(18:23), the crucifixion (e.g. the casting of lots; cf. Psa 22:18) , the death of Jesus as a climactic event signaled by the words of Jesus, “It is finished!” (19:30), the burial (19:36-37; 38-42), and finally the resurrection (20:9).

This language of fulfillment suggests that the Gospel of John sees Jesus’ mission as part of a divine plan which has been orchestrated in advance with great detail. The Gospel portrays Jesus’ ministry and crucifixion along the lines of a predestinarian worldview.

“My Time”

Along with the imagery of fulfillment, the use of the term “time” or “hour” (Greek ώρα) is pervasive in the Gospel of John and is used along predestinarian lines to describe the purpose of Jesus’ mission culminating in the cross and resurrection. The Johannine imagery associated with Jesus’ hour is noteworthy:

The use of the hour image is most striking in John’s Gospel. Here Jesus makes it plain from the very outset that his life and work is ordered by the Father’s chronology, not his own. Thus he cautions his mother at the wedding feast in

¹² Nine of these are in chapters 1-12 and five times in chapters 13-21. See Andreas Köstenberger, “John,” Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 2007), 415.

Testamentum Imperium – Volume 2 – 2009

Cana that “my hour has not yet come” (Jn 2:4 NRSV). As time goes by, he prepares his disciples for the fate that awaits him. Once in Jerusalem, where his confrontation with the religious leaders is inevitable, he declares that the “hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified” (Jn 12:23 NRSV). From this point onward the chain of events unfolds that ends in his death and resurrection. The repeated use of “hour” heightens the anticipation of this “grand finale.”¹³

A cursory reading of the Gospel alone would reveal the significance to which the author places on the imagery of term “time” or “hour” (Greek *ὥρα*). In John 2:4, Jesus refused to perform a miracle at Cana because he says that, “My time has not yet come.” (NRSV) To the woman at the well, he said that a “time is coming” (4:21) and also spoke of the resurrection of the dead saying “a time is coming” (5:25). Many people followed Jesus until he shared the cost of following him, and the passage says, “From this time” the disciples left (6:66). At first he refused to go to the feast saying “for me the right time has not yet come” (7:8), and at the feast Jesus was accosted and they sought to seize him but they could not because “his time has not yet come.” (7:30; cf. 8:20) There he said, “I am with you only for a short time” (7:33). Finally, when the time had come, the Gospel has Jesus saying, “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” (12:23). In the agony of knowing what would take place, he says, “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.” (12:27). This hour of glorification is also described as the time of judgment (12:31). In John 13:1, Jesus “knew” it was the time for him to leave the world. Time is used to predict the persecution of Christians in synagogues (16:2, 4), and the agony of what Jesus and the disciples will endure (16:22, 25, 32). In his prayer, Jesus says, “Father, the time has come. Glorify your Son, that your Son may glorify you.” (17:1) Jesus says that his time has not come. The reference again refers to the specific timing of his death, resurrection, and glorification.

These references to “time” or “hour” (Greek *ὥρα*) shows how the Gospel uses this image to describe Jesus as the fulfillment of God’s previously orchestrated, divine plan, fulfilling God’s predestined purpose in completing salvation history. Therefore the Gospel of

¹³ Leland Ryken, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998), 406.

John certainly does portray the divine sovereignty of God in the predestination of Jesus to the cross.

Summary

The Gospel of John does seem to present Jesus' as possessing divine foreknowledge (consistent with both Arminian and Calvinistic interpretations), but its presentation of election cannot yield an unequivocal “unconditional election” of Calvinism (for that, one must look elsewhere). However, the Gospel does present Jesus as the object of divine predestination, completing the predetermined plan predicated in Scriptures and fulfilled at just the right “time” or “hour” in the cross of Jesus (cf. Eph 1:3-14).

Tension between Sovereignty and Freedom

So on the one hand the Gospel presents imagery of divine sovereignty, but on the other hand, it must be weighed against passages which call believers to “abide” in their faith (John 15:4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10) and warn believers that failing to produce fruit will result in being “thrown away like a branch” which is “thrown into the fire.” (John 15:6). Both abiding faith and warnings associated with fruitlessness requires an examination of John 15.

“Abide in Me”

Over six times Jesus is reported having said to his disciples to “abide” in Jesus (John 15:4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10). They are told that abiding in him requires obeying God’s commandments and loving each other (John 15:10). Furthermore, Jesus offers the admonition to remember his words and pay attention to them saying, “I have said these things to you to keep you from stumbling.” (16:1). So does this mean that believers must remain in Jesus or fear “apostasy”?

Kostenberger says that verse 6 does not refer to “apostate believers.” Instead, he favors a reading which suggests that Judas is the one who Jesus is referring to here. However, what does “abiding” in Jesus mean? He defines it as (1) “appropriating his sacrifice at the cross and living in existential identification with him” and then (2) holding to his teaching.¹⁴ Judas then becomes the prime example of

¹⁴ Kostenberger, Andreas J. *Encountering John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 161. Also Craig Keener sees Judas as the reference behind this passage, *The Gospel of John, A Commentary* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:998.

someone who only appears to be a member in good standing with the Christian community but turns out to be one who does not abide in Jesus or his teachings.

Others see this passage as a “vivid picture of apostasy and its terrible results (cf. Heb 6:4-6; 10:26-31).” Thereby contradicting the many promises of security for the believer (cf. John 3:15, 16; 10:28). In spite of that, Grant R. Osborne concludes that this is a valid warning of the “real danger of apostasy.”¹⁵ Osborne notes that both Carson and Morris are skeptical of apostasy. Morris says, “We should not regard this as proof that true believers may fall away.”¹⁶ Carson sees this passage as a “threat” (cf. 15:16), however he regards this threat as “hypothetical.”¹⁷ Köstenberger interpretation is probably correct, interpreting the passage referring to Judas who does not remain in Jesus and therefore will not endure (anymore than a branch cut off from the vine endures).

Conclusion

An evaluation of the Johannine imagery of divine sovereignty reveals that the Gospel provides a framework consistent with foreknowledge, election, and predestination. However, the Gospel does not completely rule out human freedom. In fact, the Jews throughout John’s Gospel reject Jesus but are responsible for their own decisions. Furthermore, Judas exemplifies the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, because Jesus knows that he is “doomed,” but on the other hand it appears that Judas makes his own choices regarding Jesus. Thus the example of Judas further preserves both human responsibility and divine sovereignty within a theological tension. Therefore, the Gospel of John does portray imagery of divine sovereignty within a theological tension with human responsibility.

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¹⁵ Osborne, 253-254.

¹⁶ Morris, *John*, 669.

¹⁷ Carson, *Divine Sovereignty*, 194-195.

Testamentum Imperium – Volume 2 – 2009

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