

With regard to persons: Divine election of the poor in James and Paul



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Traditionally, Reformed accounts of divine election presuppose that God elects without regard to persons. As a result, they cannot fully accommodate the biblical motif of God's choice for the poor. In response, this article has tentatively, and in continued conversation with its contemporary Reformed theological context, advanced a biblical-theological argument that God, in a way, elects with regard to persons. Drawing on James 2:5, 1 Corinthians 1:27–29, and Romans 9–11, it has suggested that God indeed elects the poor and otherwise marginalised. In doing so, it has highlighted the way in which, according to these texts, this election of the marginal is an expression of divine wisdom. This has located the notion of divine election, in general, and of God's election of the poor, in particular, firmly in the heart of a Christian understanding of God and in opposition to the so-called 'wisdom of this world'. As such, this article has challenged both theologians who want to maintain an unamended Reformed account of divine election and advocates of prosperity gospels who consider wealth a definitive marker of election.

Contribution: This article contributes to the ongoing debate concerning divine election within the Reformed tradition. It also contributes to scholarly reflection on several New Testament texts, that is, James 2:5, 1 Corinthians 1:27–29, and Romans 9–11, and in so doing, secondarily adds to reflection on divine wisdom as an attribute of God.

Keywords: reformed theology; divine election; predestination; poverty and wealth; James; Paul.

Introduction

The Reformed doctrine of divine election, as expressed in the Canons of Dordt, for example, is part of the official doctrinal credentials of millions of Christians worldwide. As such, it continues to evoke heated debate and controversy, not least because the individual predestination it posits, gives rise to religious uncertainty and distress (Van den Brink 2023a, 2023b).

Over the past decades, and under the influence of Oepke Noordmans' original treatment of divine election (see esp. Noordmans 1979:124–134) particularly in the Dutch context, several publications on the Reformed doctrine of divine election (Hoek & Verboom 2019; Van den Brink 2018; Van der Dussen 2002; Van Eck 2022, among others) have taken note of an aspect of divine election as a biblical motif which may very well add to this slate of controversy: God's choice for 'the last, the least and lost' (Hoek & Verboom 2019:43). It is a motif that sits deeply uneasy with prosperity gospels, which are increasingly popular within the African context and beyond, and how these 'gospels' sanction the quest for individual wealth by postulating wealth as a marker of election. However, despite potentially far-reaching implications such as 'For rich people (and nowadays those include all who, let us say, possess a car) it is [...] nearly impossible to enter the Kingdom of God' (Van den Brink 2018:149), the expected controversy has not (yet) materialised – not in the least because the publications mentioned above do not follow through on such far-reaching implications. The latter may be caused in part by the following two issues. Firstly, an election of the marginal appears to be fundamentally at odds with a critical aspect of the doctrine of election as traditionally conceived: God elects *without* regard to persons. Compare, for example, how John Calvin (1960) argued that God does not elect persons because of:

... those things which when conspicuous in a man, either procure favour, grace, and dignity, or, on the contrary, produce hatred, contempt, and disgrace. Among, these are, on the one hand, riches, wealth, power, rank, office, country, beauty; and, on the other hand, poverty, want, mean birth, sordidness, contempt, and the like. (III.23.10)

Against theologies perceived as (semi-)Pelagian, Calvin, the Canons of Dordt (e.g. Dordt I.18), and other advocates of the traditional Reformed doctrine of divine election thus intend to

Note: Special Collection - Biblical Theological investigations into the attribute of God's wisdom.

safeguard notions such as absolute divine sovereignty in effectuating salvation and, equally absolute, human dependence in receiving said salvation. Secondly, within a framework of divine election as individual predestination, other aspects of divine election as a biblical motif, such as a divine election of the marginal but also God's choice for Israel, are rendered obsolete as the theologian pushes beyond the contingencies of socioeconomic position or kinship in favour of eternal individual predestination as the definitive soteriological watershed. Even if one would want to emphasise God's choice for the marginal – and many of the publications above genuinely attempt to do so – such an emphasis is inevitably structurally undercut by a traditional Reformed account of divine election as individual predestination (cf. Dekker 2024).

An extended historical or constructive systematic-theological treatment of these and related issues is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, this article lays some of the biblical-theological groundwork for properly accomplishing such a daunting task, suggesting that, in a way, God does elect *with* regard to persons, and indeed that God elects the poor and otherwise marginalised. Moreover, in so doing, it highlights how this election of the marginal is an expression of divine wisdom.

In what follows, to properly substantiate such suggestions, this article discusses three texts from the corpora of James and Paul. It devotes a section to, respectively, James 2:5, 1 Corinthians 1:27–29, and Romans 9–11. Other texts beyond these two corpora, such as Deuteronomy 7 describing God's choice for Israel as the fewest of all peoples, the so-called *anawim*-Psalms, and Jesus' beatitudes as quoted in Matthew 5 and Luke 6, would also merit discussion. However, the present text selection is particularly apt, as these Bible texts feature among Calvin's key witnesses for a divine election *without* regard to persons (cf. esp. Calvin 1960:III.23.10).

Each section of this article engages at length with one of the selected Bible texts, exploring the extent to which it provides scope for the claim that God elects *with* regard to persons. The biblical-theological argument presented as such reflects original literary and rhetoric analysis of the selected texts. At the same time, taking note of the controversial potential of the suggestion that God elects *with* regard to persons, in its presentation this article extensively draws on a selection of critically acclaimed studies from renowned scholars such as Luke Timothy Johnson, Anthony Thiselton, and John Barclay. Thus, it highlights how the contested claim that God elects *with* regard to persons actually closely aligns with common contemporary exegetical understanding. Admittedly, some modern research has questioned whether in the broader Greco-Roman context in which the early Jesus-movement emerged, the semantic field of choice, selection, and preference, as defined by the Louw-Nida lexicon (Louw & Nida 1988:361–363), was actually used to refer to a divine election of the faithful or the like (cf. Montanari 2015:6350). However, the analysis presented in this article provides support to continued theological discourse on God as an

electing God. Continued – but not unchanged. In line with the aim of this journal 'to further Reformational Theology on a scientific basis', this article engages in continued conversation with its contemporary theological context to explicate the significance of James 2, 1 Corinthians 1, and Romans 9-11 for a theological conceptualisation of divine election *with* regard to persons. At the closing of the respective sections, it takes stock of items on a theological agenda which challenges both theologians who want to maintain an unamended Reformed account of divine election, and advocates of prosperity gospels who consider wealth a definitive marker of election.

'Has not God chosen the poor' – James 2:5

Taken at face value, James 2:5 appears to suggest exegetical scope for the claim that God elects *with* regard to persons, as God has chosen 'the poor in the world': 'Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?'¹ Indeed, contrary to what some interpreters claim (Martin 1988, among others), 'poor' in this verse does not refer to spiritual poverty of sorts: 'Throughout this passage, James uses *ptōchos* rather than the *tapeinos* ("lowly") of 1:9. It refers to literal material poverty in contrast to material wealth' (Johnson 1995:222). More spiritual interpretations unnecessarily presuppose large conceptual shifts in James' use of the word *πτωχός* from James 2:2 (socioeconomic) to James 2:5 (supposedly religious) to James 2:6 (socioeconomic, reflecting on the incident described in Ja 2:2–3). But how does such an interpretation of God's choice for the poor as an election *with* regard to persons account for the pericope's apparent thrust against partiality (cf. Ja 2:1, 4, 9)? And what would such a divine choice for 'the poor in the world' amount to? To answer such questions, this section first zooms out and considers the theological framework of the epistle as a whole. Drawing on that broader theological framework, it identifies the theological import of James' use of election language in this text, and how it provokes a contemporary theological agenda concerning divine election.

Throughout his epistle, James contrasts the realm of the world [*κόσμος*] with God's order (Davids 1989; Edgar 2001; Johnson 1995, 2004). Such contrasts evoke what Luke Timothy Johnson in his influential 1995 commentary, to which the analysis presented in this article is greatly indebted, has called an 'ethical and religious dualism': James challenges the 'double-minded' (Ja 1:8; 4:8), urging his readers to friendship with God, to align with wisdom from above with the measure of true religion, faith, and purity rather than to ally with earthly wisdom with the world and its measure of wickedness, impurity, and wealth (e.g. Ja 3:13–18). This 'dualism' is expressed most cogently in James 4:4: 'Adulterers! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God'. As Johnson (1995) remarks,

1. Unless indicated otherwise, Bible texts are quoted from the NRSV (updated edition).

... this 'over against' stance is given great urgency by the eschatological framework of the composition: judgement is coming soon (5:9) when the wicked will be punished (5:1–6) and the righteous rewarded (1:12). (p. 83)

Possibly, James draws on the older Jewish covenant-shaped 'two ways' tradition for this framework (Penner 1996; McKnight 2011):

The themes of James are not simply advice. The substance of these themes are life and death (1:12–15), and James's intent in using them is to draw his readers into the world that leads to life and away from the world that leads to death. (p. 41)

James 2:5 should be interpreted against the background of this broader theological framework. It is even likely that the juxtaposed datives τῷ κόσμῳ and ἐν πίστει in this verse, at least when interpreted as datives of respect (Johnson 1995), deliberately evoke the contrast between the realm of God and the world (Cargal 1993):

Those who are considered poor from the vantage point of the world are rich from the vantage point of faith. [...] the shift in syntactical form creates an ambiguity in that ἐν πίστει might also suggest a parallel as 'the poor in the things of the world are rich in (the things of) faith'. (p. 107)

Drawing on the incongruity between God and world, James 2:5 (Johnson 1995):

contrasts the way God treats the poor and the way James' implied readers are treating them. [...] God, in a word, has chosen to *honor* the poor by elevating their status: they are rich, they are heirs of the kingdom. [...] In the sharpest possible contrast to God's honouring of the poor, however, the readers are said to have 'dishonoured the poor person'. [...] [I]n the clearest manner possible, they are actually living by the measure of the world. (pp. 228–229 [*emphasis original*])

As 'heirs of the kingdom', the poor receive 'the crown of life' (Ja 1:12), the 'crown that signifies elevation into future life with God' (Johnson 1995:188), a life expected to become manifest soon (cf. Ja 5:7–11).

Why does James's use election language and imagery in this connection? According to Johnson (1995:224), it echoes 'the biblical election [...] of Israel as God's people [...] which also carries over to the NT [...] and is applied specifically to the messianic community'. This background confirms that James may very well have presupposed a covenantal framework. It seems reasonable to argue that the seemingly conditional final subclause of James 2:5 should be interpreted accordingly as an expression of the reciprocity implied in a proper covenantal relationship. Against the background of Israel as God's elected covenant people, the divinely chosen poor, with whom the intended readers of James identify (or ought to identify), represent 'the hoped-for restored Israel among the nations' (Johnson 1995:224; cf. Ja. 1:1). Others have rightly pointed out that this focus on the poor does not necessarily violate the notion of Israel as God's people elect, as many Old Testament texts, such as the aforementioned *anawim*-Psalms, already anticipate such a close identification of Israel with

the poor (e.g. McKnight 2011). The poor do not replace Israel but contribute to Israel being restored, 'as part of a spiritual Israel normed by the texts of Torah and living in service to God and the Lord Jesus Christ' (Johnson 1995:172). Perhaps superfluously, but in a context of multiple competing claims to the right or true continuation of Israel, James' identification of the poor with Israel restored, would not have had the supersessionist overtones which interpreters nowadays rightly seek to avoid. As N.T. Wright (2022) once pointed out:

There were many messianic or quasi-messianic movements, of very different types, within a hundred years or so either side of Jesus. [...] Each was claiming that this (and not, therefore, that) was how the ancient promises were being fulfilled. [...] To suggest that such beliefs might be 'anti-Jewish', or that to quote Israel's Scriptures in support of a messianic claim was to cut off the branch one was sitting on, would be nonsense. (p. xxi)

Keeping all this in mind, to the extent that 'the poor' in this pericope indeed refers to distinct people in material need, it seems fair to conclude that James 2:5 does indeed suggest exegetical scope for the claim that God elects *with* regard to persons.

This understanding of election differs in several ways from its conceptualisation within the Reformed tradition as individual predestination: for one, its object is a collective of which the exact limits cannot be eternally unchangeable, as poverty (and wealth), unlike being sinful, are contingent and subject to continued change. Also, in light of its continuity with Israel's election as God's covenant people, it allows for a more significant emphasis on the indispensable requirement to live in accordance with God's order – not as a way to 'earn' salvation, which would 'reverse the point of God's election' and 'the flow of the argument' (Johnson 1995:224–225), but as an expression of the reciprocity implied in a proper covenantal relationship. At the same time, a continued use of the historically burdened language of divine election in the interpretation of James 2:5, may prove hermeneutically productive, as it helps to capture, at least within a contemporary Reformed context, the soteriological and eschatological gravity of God's selective choice for the poor within James' broader theological framework. God's choice for the poor, like divine election as traditionally understood, matters: ultimate salvation in the sense of participation in the kingdom is at stake.

But how is such a reading, which posits a divine partiality towards the poor, compatible with the argument against partiality with which the broader pericope is concerned? Here, a contemporary parallel may prove instructive. Whereas, as a general principle, 'all lives matter' reflects an ideal situation of impartiality, in a world tainted with the sin of racism, it all too often serves the preservation of a highly partial status quo. In such a world, 'Black lives matter' may prove the desirable and, in the long run, more impartial option. A similar dynamic seems to be at play in Old Testament exhortations to impartiality: they usually, and sometimes exclusively, focus on the risk to favour the rich and powerful by prohibiting taking a bribe (e.g. Dt 10:17; 16:19; Is 11:3–4; Ec 35:14). Meanwhile, a text such as

Ecclesiasticus 35:16 indicates how difficult it is to reduce this dynamic which sparks from the tension between ideal and reality to a simple principle of partiality towards the poor and otherwise powerless: 'He will not show partiality to the poor, but he will listen to the prayer of one who is wronged'. Along similar lines, James may have recognised that impartiality, as an isolated principle in a world of injustice, benefits the status quo and the wealthy who profit from that status quo. According to the earthly logic of the honour and shame culture of the ancient Mediterranean world, aptly illustrated by James' situation sketch in 2:2–3, 'those who have possessions and power and prestige are shown honour, whereas none is due those lacking such signs of status' (Johnson 1995:228). God's wisdom from above, however, proves 'full of mercy' and indeed 'without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy' (Ja 3:17) precisely, paradoxically, as it expresses itself in an election *with* regard for persons, in having mercy upon the poor. Thus, James 2:5 underscores how impartiality, put into practice, challenges the status quo for the benefit of the poor and otherwise powerless (cf. Ja 2:13).

This poses significant challenges for an agenda towards a contemporary theological conceptualisation of divine election. For example, does God save all the poor and subject all the rich to eternal perdition, and how would these categories have to be defined? Is such an election 'eternal' if poverty and wealth are contingent and subject to continuous change, and to what extent does such an understanding of election compromise divine sovereignty? In line with the limited purposes of this article and, indeed, a proper understanding of James' Epistle, two brief concluding remarks are in order. On the one hand, it would be exegetically inappropriate to dismiss (a reading of) James' Epistle in terms of a divine '*with* regard for persons' as (semi-)Pelagian. According to James and in keeping with Jewish tradition (e.g. Pr 30:8–9; Ec 5:18), poverty is not an ideal that merits divine election as such. Such a conclusion would neglect both James' criticism of the way in which the rich exploit the poor (e.g. Ja 5:4), which implies that their poverty is not to be aspired to, and the way in which James 2:5 traces the initiative in the salvation of the poor back to God's choice, as an expression of God's wisdom from above. However, on the other hand, a contemporary conceptualisation of divine election must reckon with the covenantal framework within which this divine choice finds expression and within which it requires reciprocity. Put in more Reformed terms: the eschatologically urgent call to action, presupposed by James' 'ethical and religious dualism', should not be pre-empted by a doctrine of individual predestination and the solid watershed between redemption and gratitude that it implies.

'God chose what is low and despised' – 1 Corinthians 1:27–29

Whereas Paul and James have often been pitched as each other's theological antipodes, not in the least regarding their understanding of salvation, more recent research has emphasised important commonalities (e.g. Blomberg 2022a, 2022b). The discussion of Paul's depiction of an electing God

in 1 Corinthians 1:27–29 in the present section, contributes to this trend. Drawing on a (partly at least) socioeconomic interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1:27–29, it argues that this text allows for an interpretation which indicates the theological scope for a divine election *with* regard for people.

Perhaps even more so than in the case of James 2:5, scholars question whether Paul presupposes a divine partiality towards the poor and otherwise marginalised. What is clear is that, according to the first chapters of the Epistle, God's wisdom of a crucified Christ sharply contrasts with worldly wisdom, as it expresses itself in reverence for 'status, achievement, and success' (Thiselton 2000:176). This was an issue in Corinth 'where public boasting and self-promotion had become an art form' (Witherington 1995:8) – a fact which many attribute to its dynamic as a vibrant mercantile city with many opportunities to improve (and indeed lose) one's status (Thiselton 2000). Judging from Paul's epistle, the Christian community proved no exception (e.g. 1 Cor 1:10–3:23; 11:17–22). But according to Paul, the community should have known better than to boast in their status, as 'not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth' (1 Cor 1:26) In fact:

... the foolish things of the world God chose to shame the clever; and the weak things of the world God chose to shame positions of strength; and the insignificant of the world and the despised God chose, yes, the nothings, to bring to nothing the 'somethings'. (1 Cor 1:27–29, [transl. Thiselton 2000:183–184])

The precise socioeconomic identity of the community in Corinth, and therefore the interpretation of this terminology in 1 Corinthians 1:26–29, is the object of much scholarly controversy over the past decades. It seems that a reading, which maintains both that the Corinthian community was socioeconomically diverse and that a significant share of its members was poor or otherwise unimportant according to common status indicators (e.g. Longenecker 2010; Meeks 1983) is most helpful in making sense of these verses. Indeed, research has confirmed that key terms in these verses, notably 'foolish' [μωρός], 'weak' [ἀσθενής], 'low' [ἀγενής], and 'despised' [ἐξουθενέω], can and perhaps even should be interpreted as worldly status categories with clear socioeconomic dimensions. As John Barclay (2015b) writes:

This expansion and elaboration of categories alerts us to the fact that all these terms have social connotations: wisdom, power, and honor are overlapping characteristics that reach their acme among the elite, whose education, influence, and status give them the authority and the means to shape social norms. (p. 3)

Against this background, a (partly at least) socioeconomic interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1:26–29 seems most plausible. After all, even if not without traces of irony, Paul's depiction in verse 26 of the Corinthians at the time of their call, only proves effective as part of his broader argument in this chapter against boasting in one's status or accomplishments if the readers recognise it as accurate. Likewise, the broader theological principle in 1 Corinthians 1:27–29, as a challenge to boasting in one's status, only makes sense when referring to actual worldly powerlessness.

Understood thus, Paul, not unlike James, seems to presuppose something of a divine election *with* regard to persons: God chose what is foolish, weak, low, and despised. According to Anthony Thiselton (2000:176), 'chose' in this context reflects both God's 'sovereign freedom to choose to love [...] regardless of human deserving or achievement' and the 'discontinuity [...] between God and the world'. Thus, both (Barclay 2020):

the message and the community it creates embody a challenge to the normal hierarchies of value, by which social power, free birth, distinguished ancestry, and the skills of an 'educated' person constitute the symbolic capital or worth that was widely cherished in the Graeco-Roman world. (p. 301)

Does this posit divine partiality towards the poor and otherwise marginalised? According to Barclay (2020), it does not:

Paul does not simply invert these values, to give value to the weak over the strong [...]. The alternative value system he promotes is not just the old system turned on its head, but a system of worth created by the 'calling' of God, which he elsewhere associates with the grace or gift of God (Gal 1:6, 16; Rom 9:6–13, etcetera.). What is essential for Paul is that this gift is given *incongruously*, not matching the prior worth of its recipients – in status or achievement – but given without regard to worth as defined by ethnicity, gender, legal status, social level, or moral excellence. (p. 301)

In other words, God's choice for the marginal suggests a 'level' (Witherington 1995:118) soteriological playing field for all, which accords with Paul's well-known emphasis on faith as the sole requirement for Jews and Gentiles alike for 'getting in' to the new covenant as established in Jesus Christ.

This reading has exegetical merit. But, recalling both the dynamic relation between partiality and impartiality in James 2 and how some in the early Jesus-movement took up the identification of God's people elect with the marginal, I want to suggest the possibility of a deviating interpretation of 1 Corinthians 1. Could it be the case that, according to Paul, God's choice for the foolish, weak, low, and despised not only makes a *negative* theological point about the incongruous nature of grace in the sense that it does not value status or achievement, but that it also implies a *positive*, namely that God's wisdom expresses itself in the salvation of those low and despised – the people of the margins without claim to status or achievement? Sigurd Grindheim (2005, 2016) touches on the possibility of this alternative reading as he writes:

[God's] election is therefore a demonstration of his judgement of human accomplishment and status. At the same time, it is a manifestation of his grace. Those who are chosen to have not deserved it; they have not been in a position where they could be considered the natural choice. Their choice owes to the creative power of God, the power to create something out of nothing. (p. 338)

This alternative reading of 1 Corinthians 1:27–29 would confirm that Paul, too, allows for a divine election *with* regard

to persons, favouring the poor and otherwise marginalised. Parallel to the way in which James associated wealth with the realm of the world, and indeed parallel to how several other New Testament texts contrast God's choice for the poor with woe and warnings to the rich (e.g. Lk 1:51–53, 6:20–26, 16:19–31), this election *with* regard to persons goes beyond a level playing field and warns those with power and status of their likely eschatological predicament.

But does such a reading not violate Paul's broader argument against 'boasting'? Does Paul truly suggest a turning of the tables? Does, perhaps unintentionally, being foolish, weak, low, or despised become a reason for boasting? Exegetically, such implications are clearly unwarranted. Paul, like James, does not posit poverty as an ideal; for example, he invested significantly in alleviating the poverty of the community in Jerusalem (2 Cor 8–9). But more importantly, with an eye to a contemporary conceptualisation of divine election, as an election *with* regard to persons and indeed an election of the poor and otherwise marginalised, these implications are theologically unwarranted. The objection of a 'turning of the tables' seems to owe much to anti (semi-)Pelagian discourses on absolute divine sovereignty. To further refine the preceding discussion: its governing assumption that absolute divine sovereignty necessarily precludes any divine consideration of human conditions, that is, an election *with* regard to persons, is not unlike the classic paradox of Achilles and the tortoise. On paper, the tortoise outruns Achilles. But in reality, Achilles overtakes the tortoise. Similarly, on paper divine sovereignty precludes any involvement of human conditions or initiative. But in the reality of a broken world, a divine choice for the marginal does not contradict divine sovereignty but rather expresses that sovereignty as freedom to be merciful. In this reality, suggesting that poverty and deprivation restrict divine sovereignty, as they would merit gracious election and thus prove reasons to boast, is equally misplaced as claiming that a drowning person merits the lifebuoy which saves their life or that they may boast in the way in that they held on to it (De Jong 2021).

Keeping such considerations in mind, it is not beyond reason to maintain that Paul presupposed a divine election of the poor and otherwise marginalised as a positive flipside of his negative critique of boasting in status or achievements. Assuming this presupposition may perhaps shed light on the offensive foolishness of the message of the cross as perceived by 'those who are perishing' (1 Cor 1:18). If the cross only pronounces judgement over human attitudes towards status and achievement and, as such, (merely) creates a level playing field where no one has reason to boast, it is hard to explain the strong antipathy of those with status and achievement against the message of the cross (cf. 1 Cor 1:18, 23). After all, besides offending their sense of pride, this message would leave their status and achievement as such untouched. Indeed, people with status and achievement would not necessarily take such strong offence at a God who chooses *without* regard to persons, but rather at a God *with* regard to persons – but not the persons of their liking – a God who 'so mercifully forgives, that it offends us' (Noordmans 1979:134).

'They shall be called children of the living God' – Romans 11:33–35

So far, this article has shown how James and Paul both posit God's wisdom in opposition to worldly wisdom. For both, this opposition becomes particularly evident in God election *with* regard to persons and, specifically, in God's mercy upon the poor. Without necessarily subscribing to the implied chronology, the discussion has broadly confirmed the main thrust of Craig Blomberg's recent claim (2022a:118–131 at 128) that 'James uses the rationale that God has "chosen" the poor who love him (2:5), just as not many in Corinth were rich when they were "called" (1 Cor. 1:26)'. The challenge this line of interpretation poses to traditional Reformed accounts of divine election *without* regard to persons is clear: Have they sufficiently captured this dimension of election as a predicate of God in Bible texts? And is this aspect of divine election as a biblical motif ultimately reconcilable with a conception of divine election as individual predestination? At the same time, as already indicated, an election *with* regard to persons has proven to raise many questions of its own, for example concerning the relation between divine eternity and the contingency implied in poverty or concerning the relation between poverty and faith. This article has briefly touched on only two such questions concerning God's impartiality and the supposed meritorious nature of poverty. An extended systematic-theological discussion of God's election *with* regard to persons exceeds the purposes of this exploratory biblical-theological article (for a first attempt, see Dekker 2024).

For further confirmation, this article turns to Romans 9–11. This text, and its closing doxology on God's wisdom in particular, is among Calvin's prime witnesses (1960:III.23.10) for divine election as individual predestination *without* regard to persons (Rm 11):

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?'. (vv. 33–35)

However, as Wright (1991) observed several decades ago and Barclay (2015a:382) confirmed more recently: 'Recent discussion of Romans 9–11 has reached consensus [...] that their subject matter is God's dealings with Israel (not election or predestination in abstract)'. But if not because of the mysterious wonder of individual predestination, why then does Paul praise God's wisdom as 'unsearchable' and 'inscrutable' (Rm 11:33)? According to contemporary interpreters, this doxology reflects Paul's joy concerning grace for Jew and gentile alike (Moo 2018), or his hope that Israel will ultimately again be included in salvation (e.g. Schreiner 1998). Such interpretations build on the wisdom laudation's structural position at the close of Paul's discourse on Israel vis-à-vis the Gentiles. If the election language and imagery, which permeate the preceding chapters, inform the doxology on such interpretations in that they articulate both God's freedom to have mercy 'on whomever he chooses' (Rm 9:18), that is Israel, and God's

faithfulness to God's choice for Israel: 'as regards election they are beloved for the sake of their ancestors, for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable'. (Rm 11:28–29) As James Dunn (1988) writes:

Appropriately, the hope of a truly universal salvation leads into a hymn in praise of the Creator, the unknowability of his ways, and the certainty that he cannot be deterred from the accomplishment of his purpose. (p. 697)

Paul is amazed by God's wisdom as it proves graceful to all, and loyal to Israel.

There is no exegetical reason to downplay this broad exegetical consensus concerning Paul's emphasis on Israel vis-à-vis the Gentiles in Romans 9–11. But the discussion of this article so far invites us to pay attention to how Paul's use of election language and imagery in these chapters fits with a divine electing preference for people without status or achievements (Grindheim 2016). Barclay (2015a) observes that:

[T]hese chapters are replete with rhetorical reversals, where the lesser, the few, the disqualified, and the 'unnatural' are the object of God's incongruous action (e.g., 9:12, 24–26, 30; 11:17–24), while the greater, the many, and the 'natural' are excluded, disqualified, or cut off (e.g., 9:27, 31–33; 10:21; 11:17–24). This rhetoric of reversal is particularly powerful where symmetry creates a neat inversion: the non-competitors reach the goal, while the runners fail (9:30–32); the wild olive branches are grafted in while natural olive branches are cut off (11:17–24). (p. 385)

In these chapters, it is the elder which shall serve the younger (Rm 9:12), and only a remnant which will be saved (Rm 9:27). Indeed, God's choice for 'things that are not' (1 Cor 1:28) strongly resonates with Paul's depiction of the movement from Israel to the Gentiles and back again, central to his overarching argument: 'Those who were not my people I will call "my people," and her who was not beloved I will call "beloved"' (Rm 9:25; cf. 9:30). Such examples allow for the possibility that Paul's closing doxology on divine wisdom does not, or at least not only, reflect on God's relation to Israel in general. Not unlike his analysis of 1 Corinthians 1:27–29, Barclay (2015a) argues that these examples reinforce the incongruity of grace and that this feeds into Paul's reflection on God's wisdom:

The paradoxes in this [incongruous] pattern of grace evoke Paul's final acclamation (11:33–36), which celebrates the depth of God's wealth, wisdom, and knowledge (11:33). [...] As elsewhere in these chapters, Paul assumes the priority of God's giving (see the $\pi\rho\omicron$ -prefixes in 9:11, 23, and 11:2; cf. 8:28–29), but this is significant chiefly in underlining its incongruity. God does not give in return, to match a prior gift: there is no correspondence in this or any other respect. (p. 403)

Without entirely revisiting how Barclay connects such insights to what this article has described as a 'level playing field' interpretation, it is worth noting the exegetical merit of this line of interpretation – and indeed its hermeneutical appeal, at least for those who do not consider themselves among the poor. But in light of the preceding discussion of James 2:5 and 1 Corinthians 1:27–29, it does not seem implausible that the doxology at the close of Romans 9–11 somehow reinforces

Paul's perception of God's wisdom as depicted earlier (Dunn 1988) in 1 Corinthians: not so much as abstract, inaccessible knowledge, or as a formal point concerning the nature of grace, but as surprising mercy revealed in Christ crucified and therefore as good news for those without status or achievement – those who appear to be lost.

Conclusion

Drawing by way of examples on discussions of James 2:5, 1 Corinthians 1:27–29, and Romans 9–11, this article has tentatively, and in continued conversation with its contemporary theological context, explored a biblical-theological argument that, in a way, God elects *with* regard to persons, and that God elects the poor and otherwise marginalised. In doing so, it has highlighted how, according to these texts, this election of the marginal is an expression of divine wisdom. The latter locates the notion of divine election in general and of God's election of the poor, in particular, firmly in the heart of a Christian understanding of God and in opposition to the wisdom of this world. As such, this article presents a theological agenda, challenging both theologians who want to maintain an unamended Reformed account of divine election, and advocates of prosperity gospels who consider wealth a definitive marker of election.

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