

The Interface Between the Doctrines of Divine Foreknowledge and Human Free Will: Judas Iscariot as a Test Case¹

James Partee Toga and Annang Asumang

Abstract

The New Testament indicates that Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus was foreknown by God and by Jesus, and that it was in fulfilment of Scripture, and yet at the same time it judges him culpable for his actions. In that case, to what extent is divine foreknowledge compatible with human free will? Through exegetical, philosophical and theological analyses of the relevant passages, the study arrives at a number of conclusions about the nature and pastoral function of compatibilism in the specific test case of Judas Iscariot. It is observed for example, that all the New Testament passages in relation to Judas Iscariot underline the interplay between divine foreknowledge and human free will in a non-contrastive transcendent manner, even though they place different emphases on the degree of this compatibility, while others underline a complicated role for even Satan.

Some of the differences in emphases between the Gospels with regard to Judas Iscariot are also shown to reflect respective socio-

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Keywords

Human Free Will, Divine Foreknowledge, Betray, Compatibilism, Incompatibilism

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2 The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

pastoral contexts of their first readers. The article concludes that God held Judas Iscariot culpable for his action, though God foreknew it and that it fulfilled scripture.

1. Introduction

The New Testament presents four apparently conflicting views about Judas Iscariot's role in Jesus' betrayal. Firstly, it suggests that Judas Iscariot freely and determinedly betrayed Jesus (Matt 26:14–16; Mark 14:10, 11; John 13:18). Secondly, it suggests that Satan entered into Judas Iscariot and prompted him to betray Jesus (Luke 22:3–6; John 13:2, 27). Thirdly, it suggests that Jesus himself chose Judas Iscariot to betray him (John 6:70, 71; cf. 17:12). Lastly, it suggests that Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus was necessary to fulfil the divine plan (Matt 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22). These four views evidently relate to the question of the interaction between human free will and agency and divine foreknowledge. This article therefore attempts to answer one main question, namely: how do the New Testament's accounts on Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Jesus shed light on the philosophical and theological arguments posed by the interface between divine foreknowledge and human free will?

Scholars have disagreed about whether Judas Iscariot could be justly labelled as betrayer, because of the Gospels' use of *παράδωμι* to describe Judas Iscariot's actions instead of *προδίδωμι* or *προδοτής*. Klassen (1996:47, 49) particularly argues from a lexicographical analysis of *παράδωμι* that all of the citations of *παράδωμι* in the New Testament have the concept of 'hand over' rather than 'betray' or 'treachery'. Furthermore, Klassen and like-minded scholars contend that first-century Greek literature had no example of *παράδωμι* meaning 'betrayal', 'disloyalty', or 'deceit' (Klassen 1996:47–74; cf. Carlson 2010:472–474; Derrett 1980:3–4). Instead, Klassen (1966:47–58) asserts that the words they used for 'betray' and 'traitor' were *προδίδωμι*² and *προδοτής*³ respectively.

An objective of this article is to perform a biblical examination of how the interaction between divine foreknowledge and human free will is exemplified in how the Bible characterises the particular case of Judas. While it is unlikely to address this translation issue conclusively, understanding the theological underpinnings of the characterization of Judas Iscariot will likely contribute to evaluating which of the scholarly interpretations appropriately define him.

The article is divided into four sections—(a) a summary of philosophical and theological solutions to compatibilism, (b) a brief account of compatibilism in the OT and Literature of Second

² *προδίδωμι* means, 'to turn over in a treacherous manner, betray' (Ibid.:867).

³ *προδοτής* means, 'traitor, betrayer' (Ibid.).

Temple Judaism, (c) exegetical summary on the characterization of Judas Iscariot in the NT and (d) theological reflections on compatibilism and Judas.

2. Philosophical and Theological Solutions to Compatibilism

Both philosophically and theologically, the interface between divine foreknowledge and human free will has been conceived around two broad schools of thought, namely, compatibilism and incompatibilism. The Compatibilism School believes that human freedom is compatible with divine omniscience and divine foreknowledge (Helm 2011:184–205; Nartey 2016:135–155). On the other hand, the Incompatibilism School believes that human freedom is incompatible with divine foreknowledge and divine determination (Nartey 2016:135–155; Mele 2015:297–309). Between these two schools, especially within the compatibilism school of thought, there are various degrees of approaches, leading to several different shades of conceptualization of the interface.

2.1. Philosophical Solutions

Philosophers such as Aristotle (Fieser 1998:47–50; cf. Shedd 1999:21; Josephus *War* 2.163; *Ant.* 13:171), Boethius (Wood 2010:41), Frankfurt (McKenna 2008:771–773; cf. Babcock 1988:28–55), and Ockham (Wood 1999:72–84) on compatibilism between divine foreknowledge and human free will held to compatibilism wholly or partly. For instance, Aristotle held that humans are living souls who possess reasoning ability, and that ‘Reason is the source of the first principles of knowledge’ (Fieser 1998:47).

Aristotle divided ‘reason’ into two kinds, passive and active. Passive reason is the act of receiving, combining and comparing ‘the objects of thought’. Active reason, on the other hand, ‘makes objects of thought...makes the world intelligible, and bestows on the materials of knowledge those ideas or categories which make them accessible to thought’ (ibid.). He believed that humans are rational beings, and possess a well-defined ability to evaluate, contemplate and control their emotions and desires (Fieser 1998:48). Aristotle termed this reasoning ability to control the emotions and desires as ‘moral virtue’ (ibid.).

Moreover, Aristotle argued that humans are able to control their desires because of their ‘character traits’ (ibid.). Furthermore, Aristotle stated, ‘Actions are voluntary when the originating cause of action (either virtuous or vicious) lies in [humans]’ (Fieser 1998:50). Aristotle’s arguments suggest that humans are able to choose their actions freely, in view of the fact that God gave them

the ability to reason (cf. Shedd 1999:21; Josephus: *War* 2.163; *Ant.* 13:171).

Boethius (Wood 2010:41) argued that God does not fully control what happens within his foreknowledge, in order that he might not deny humans of ‘the power of contrary choices’ (Wood 2010:41). Frankfurt (McKenna 2008:771–773; cf. Babcock 1988:28–55) argued that humans are liable for their actions even if they do not choose between alternative actions. Finally, Ockham (Wood 1999:72–84) held that doers of wicked acts do not act out of ignorance necessarily; they do understand what they do and allow their will to guide them (Wood 1999:74, 84). In fact, Ockham argues that people who carry out wicked acts ‘have a well-developed understanding of the universal principles of moral science’ (ibid. 75). Ockham’s view implies that divine foreknowledge does not annul human liability.

2.2. Summary of Theological Solutions

The different Christian theological traditions also propose different solutions to the problem of the interface between divine foreknowledge and human free will review. Even though they hold generally to incompatibilism between divine foreknowledge and human free will, and that divine foreknowledge annuls human freedom, the Reformed tradition admits that humans have some level of free will. For example, Calvinists, including John Calvin himself (Cunningham 1994:581) accept that divine foreknowledge does not completely eliminate human free will. Calvin (King 1988–2007:n.p.) accepts Jesus’ words in John 3:18 that God will condemn people because of their unbelief in the name of his Son rather than because of predestination. In addition, the Westminster Confession (Article XII; cf. Article XX.29) teaches about sinners repenting and exercising faith for salvation, even though it teaches also that God predestines and foreordains certain people unto eternal life or to eternal damnation. Reformed scholars such as Turrentin (Helm 2010:187–199; cf. Kim 2017:36), Reymond (1998:721–725) and Grudem (2009:10–12 cf. Peckham 2014:198), admit that humans do exercise their ‘willing choices’, though in a limited way.

The Arminian Tradition on the other hand, holds to the compatibilism view, even though some proponents accept the Reformed doctrine of the total depravity of the humanity and the perseverance of the saints. Arminian theologians affirm divine foreknowledge of the future choices of humans and the actions that those humans will take (cf. Studebaker 2004:471, 472; Coppedge 1987:133, 134). God does work sovereignly. However, he neither annuls nor interferes with the freedom of the human agent or

limits that freedom (Barclay 2006:6, 7). It seems evident that the ability of humans to think and act freely, in relationship to the foreknowledge and election of God, is both scriptural and innate (cf. Taylor 1985:31–33; Helm 2010; Kim 2017)—God created humans in his own image (*imago Dei*).

The doctrines of Middle Knowledge and Open Theism support humans using their free will. For instance, Middle Knowledge holds that even though God foreknows what any of his creatures would do or not do at various times, he himself does not cause any of his creatures to act (Campbell 2006:3, 4; cf. Bryant 1992:95). Similarly, Open Theism teaches that God has given humans libertarian freedom to choose their actions (Sanders 2003:96; cf. Sanders 2012:147). Boyd (2009:43) argues that God does not control everything that humans do and neither does everything happen according to his will.

The Scriptures indicate that fundamental nature of the *imago Dei* remained fully functional after the fall. For example, Yahweh admitted that ‘the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’ (Gen 3:22). This passage implies that Adam retained Yahweh’s attribute of knowing the difference between ‘good’ and ‘evil’ after his fall. Secondly, the passage implies that Adam retained Yahweh’s attribute of making a choice. Human choices and their subsequent actions and results show that humans do possess and exercise their free will. For instance, humans do plan and execute various actions—some are noble and others are ignoble. Oden (1987:91) points out that humankind’s capacity to think freely and to act freely are ‘definitive of personal existence’. This freedom to choose, though finite, and often self-centred, ‘shares in [the] divine freedom’ (ibid.).

3. Compatibilism in the OT and Literature of Second Temple Judaism

3.1. Compatibilism in the OT

The Old Testament does teach that there is interplay between divine foreknowledge and human free will. The story of the Pharaoh of Egypt in the book of Exodus (Exod 9:16) depicts compatibility between the foreknowledge of God and human free will. Exodus shows Yahweh’s involvement in the life of Pharaoh in order to achieve his divine plan. The early chapters of Exodus present the ironic account of the interplay between God’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart and Pharaoh hardening his own

heart in order to accomplish the divine purpose of Yahweh (Gilbert 2001:76, 77, 80, 81). Thus the book reveals that Yahweh hardened the heart of Pharaoh ten times (Exod 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8; cf. 4:21; 7:3; 14:4) and Pharaoh hardened his own heart ten times (Exod 7:13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34, 35; 13:15). It is worth noting that both the hardening by Yahweh and Pharaoh are described with words which come from two main Hebrew verbs—*hāzaq* and *kābēd*. *Hāzaq* means, ‘to stand firm’, ‘to fortify’, ‘to prevail’, ‘to hold one’s own against’ as in a military context (Gilbert 2001:80). In addition, Saul willfully disobeyed Yahweh’s command. God held him liable and dethroned him (1 Sam 15:1–23). Israel rejected Yahweh and Yahweh appointed the Chaldeans to treat them harshly (Amos 6:14).

3.2. Literature of Second Temple Judaism

Even though Second Temple Jewish literature underlines a diversity of approaches to the subject of compatibilism in some of its key texts, an examination of Josephus’ works, the Qumran Literature and the Sapiental Literature, indicates that they explicitly and implicitly point out some level of compatibility between divine foreknowledge and human free will. For example, an examination of Josephus’ historical accounts of Adam, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes and King Cyrus explicitly and implicitly acknowledge compatibilism between divine foreknowledge and human free will (*Ant.* 2.1.1.3, 4; 13.171; *War* 2.163–165; cf. Klawans 2009:47).

Like Josephus’ writings, the Qumran Literature is replete with implicit and explicit references to compatibilism between divine foreknowledge (manifested in divine predestination and divine foreordination) and human free will. For example, the tract, 4Q255, III states that God ‘has created man to govern the world, and has appointed for him two spirits in which to walk until the time of his visitation’. This statement appears to attribute all humankind’s actions to God. However, it also attributes humankind’s actions to their own choices (Moerschbacher n.d:6). Moerschbacher thinks God might have established the two ‘spirits’ (the spirits of truth and injustice) in order to give humankind the opportunity to choose between them. For example, 4Q473 (ibid.) states, ‘[God] has placed [before you] t[wo] ways one which is goo[d] and one which is evil. If you choose the good [way], he will bless you. But if you walk in the [evil] way, [He will curse you]’ [sic]. This implies that God does not control or influence the choices or activities of his creation absolutely. It also implies that God has given humankind freedom to choose their preferred manner of life.

There are indications in the Dead Sea Scrolls that ‘covenant members’ within the Qumran Community exercised their free will about observing the precepts of God. For instance, the community required every adult to deliberately and personally commit to the sect to which God elected them (Vermes 2004:103, 104). They were to seek God whole-heartedly (1QS1, 1–2), separate themselves from ‘the habitation of unjust men’ (1QS VIII, 13) and devote themselves completely to what they believed to be the cause of God (Vermes 2004:121). Their acts of seeking God, separating themselves from ‘unjust men’ and wholly devoting themselves to God point toward the use of human free will.

The relationship between human free will and divine foreknowledge is therefore in a non-contrastive transcendent relationship. In other words, they are in direct and not inverse proportion (Barclay 2006:7). Barclay argues that ‘Even if God is regarded as the originator of the causal chain, the human respondents act from their own self-initiated will, since integrity of that will can be maintained only if it is in some respects or at some points independent of the direct creative will of God’ (ibid:6).

As with the Qumran literature, a number of the key passages in sapiential Jewish literature of the Second Temple Period reflect on the interface between divine foreknowledge and human free will. For example, Sirach (15:11–20) stresses human free will and liability for evil doing, notwithstanding God’s sovereignty and foreknowledge of ‘all things’:

Say not thou, ‘It is through the Lord that I fell away’: for thou oughtest not to do the things that he hateth. Say not thou, ‘He hath caused me to err’: for he hath no need of the sinful man...He himself made man from the beginning, and left him in the hand of his counsel; If thou wilt, to keep the commandments, and to perform acceptable faithfulness.

He hath set fire and water before thee: stretch forth thy hand unto whether thou wilt. Before man is life and death; and whether him liketh shall be given him. Before man is life and death; and whether him liketh shall be given him. For the wisdom of the Lord is great, and he is mighty in power, and beholdeth all things: And his eyes are upon them that fear him, and he knoweth every work of man. He hath commanded no man to do wickedly, neither hath he given any man licence to sin (cf. Sir. 11:14–16).

The above passage underlines two facts. Firstly, it recognises the conflict between divine foreknowledge and human free will. On the one hand (and briefly), it shows that God had absolute foreknowledge of all things and peoples prior to creating them, and

that he commanded them to avoid doing wickedness. On the other hand (and extensively), the passage shows that God gave people the freedom of choice. Sirach (10:4, 5), however, it acknowledges the sovereignty and foreknowledge of God. It seems as if the passage resolves the conflict in favour of human free will.

4. Exegetical summary on the characterization of Judas Iscariot in the NT

4.1. Examination of Relevant Passages of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts

The examinations of the Synoptic Gospels and Acts show that they all agree on Judas Iscariot being a prominent disciple and an apostle of Jesus (Matt 10:1–5; Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:13–16; Acts 1:17, 25). They also agree that Judas Iscariot's action was predicted, as well as it fulfilled Scripture (Matt 26:24; Mark 14:21; Luke 22:22; Acts 1:15–20). This fulfilment of scriptures suggests that God had foreknowledge of his action; yet, it does not infer that God's foreknowledge annulled Judas' action. The passages also show that Judas Iscariot guided those who arrested Jesus (Matt 26:48–50; Mark 14:44–46; Luke 22:47, 48; Acts 1:16).

Furthermore, the Synoptic Gospels record that Judas initiated the bargaining with the chief priests about betraying Jesus to them (Matt 26:14; Mark 14:10; Luke 22:4) and that Judas determinedly sought to betray Jesus (Matt 26:16; Mark 14:11; Luke 22:6). This determination indicates Judas Iscariot's wilfulness to achieve his own objective. It is worth noting that these books differ on certain minor details regarding Judas Iscariot. For example, Luke indicates in his gospel that Satan influenced the role that Judas played in betraying Jesus (22:3, 4); however, he indicates in Acts that Judas was completely responsible (Acts 1:15–20). Also, unlike the Synoptic Gospels, Acts reports that the remuneration that Judas Iscariot received was the result of his wicked action (1:18). The reference to Judas Iscariot receiving a reward for his wickedness makes him liable for his action.

The Synoptic Gospels and Acts do portray Judas Iscariot's character negatively as a greedy traitor who willfully betrayed Jesus, even though Luke suggests a satanic influence. Furthermore, these books indicate that Judas Iscariot was guilty of betraying Jesus in spite of Jesus' foreknowledge that he would betray him, and in spite of Jesus choosing Judas Iscariot as a choice disciple/apostle. Matthew especially shows that Judas

Iscariot regretted his action and subsequently hanged himself. These actions show his culpability.

For instance, Matthew says of Judas, *Τότε πορευθείς εἰς τῶν δώδεκα ὁ λεγόμενος Ἰούδας Ἰσκαριώτης, πρὸς τοὺς ἀρχιερεῖς* ('Then one of the twelve, who was called Judas Iscariot, went to the chief priests', Matt 26:14abc). The phrase, *Τότε πορευθείς* that Matthew uses with Judas Iscariot infers that Judas was the one who took the initiative to go to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them, rather than their seeking him out or coercing him to betray Jesus (cf. Carlson 2010:474, 475; McCumber 1975:197; Robertson 2011:227). This is the probable reason why Matthew chose to use *πορευθείς* as aorist middle participle (cf. Zerwick and Grosvenor 1993:85). The action of Judas marred his character and portrayed him as heartless and deceitful (cf. Carlson 2010:472–478). Davies and Allison (Turner 2008:621) describe Judas Iscariot's action as pathetic 'and enigmatically evil, and his motivation in betraying Jesus is inscrutable'.

Furthermore, Matthew records Judas' response to Jesus' disclosure that one of them would betray him as, *Μήτι ἐγώ εἰμι, ῥαββί;* (Matthew 26:25). This question appears to be rhetorical. Judas might have intended to elicit a negative response from Jesus (cf. Blomberg 1992:389). Thus, the translation by NLT ('I'm not the one, am I?'), reflects this well. Jesus' response to the other disciples vindicated them, while it indicted the one who 'dipped his hand in the bowl' with Jesus (Matt 26:23). Jesus' answer to Judas, 'You have said so' (26:25) implies he had foreknowledge of Judas' action. While Jesus' response to Judas may not have exposed him as a betrayer to the other disciples, Matthew's audience may have understood it so (Greene 2016:198).

4.2. Examination of Passages Related to Judas Iscariot in the Gospel of John

The Gospel of John presents Judas Iscariot, explicitly and implicitly, in at least nine noteworthy ways: (1) John presents Judas as an unbelieving disciple and 'a devil' who, being 'one of the twelve', would later betray Jesus (6:70, 71; cf. Wright 2009:544–559). (2) John presents Judas Iscariot as 'a thief' who would betray Jesus (12:4–6). (3) John presents Judas Iscariot as the disciple whose heart 'the devil' induced to betray Jesus (13:2). (4) John presents Judas Iscariot as the disciple to whom Jesus gave a piece of bread in order to identify him as his betrayer (13:21–26). (5) John presents Judas Iscariot as the disciple into whom Satan entered 'after he received the piece of bread' (13:26b, 27). (6) John presents Judas Iscariot as the disciple who apostatised after he

received the piece of bread from Jesus (13:30). (7) John presents Judas Iscariot as the disciple who 'lifted his heel' against Jesus (13:18, 19). (8) John presents Judas Iscariot as 'the son of destruction' (17:6–12). (9) John presents Judas Iscariot as the one who took a detachment of soldiers and police into the garden to arrest Jesus (18:1–5).

The Gospel of John appears to compare Judas Iscariot's act of betrayal with that of David's trusted counsellor, Ahithophel (John 13:18; cf. Psa 41:9; 2 Sam 15:12). John states that Judas fulfilled Scripture by this action (13:18). Additionally, John indicates that Jesus did not protect and keep Judas from becoming lost, because Judas was already lost and that this fate was in fulfilment of Scripture (17:12). The reference to scriptural fulfilment implies divine foreknowledge, whereas the ways in which John portrays the character of Judas and his act of betrayal suggest that he holds Judas liable for his character and his action (cf. Kelly 1995:38–40). John's dual presentation of these issues therefore indicates the interplay between divine foreknowledge and human free will (cf. Oropeza 2010:345–349).

5. Conclusion: Theological reflections on compatibilism and Judas

This article has summarised the exegetical findings on the interactions between divine foreknowledge and human free will, which are exemplified in how the Bible portrays the particular case of Judas Iscariot. Various passages of the Synoptic Gospels, Acts, and the Gospel of John have indicated that Judas Iscariot willfully chose not to believe in Jesus (cf. John 6:64), as well as that he chose willfully to betray Jesus (cf. Matt 26:14–16; 27:3, 4; Mark 14:10, 11; Luke 22:3–6). Additionally, these passages have shown that even though God may have had a hand in Judas' role (indicated by Jesus choosing Judas and Judas' action fulfilling Scripture) Judas used his free disposition to betray Jesus. The Gospel of John in particular, suggests that Judas Iscariot's bad character caused him to betray Jesus (John 12:4–6; 6:70). I think Judas Iscariot's determination to betray Jesus, to the extent that he disregarded Jesus' prediction that one of the twelve would betray him (Matt 26:21, 23; Luke 22:21–23; John 13:18), may have been due to Judas' character of greed (cf. Matt 26:15; John 12:6) or because he was already lost (John 17:12).

Thus, Judas Iscariot's act of betrayal may not have been the result of divine foreknowledge or of Jesus choosing him, or of Satan entering him and influencing him. All the New Testament

passages in relation to Judas Iscariot underline the interplay between divine foreknowledge and human free will in a non-contrastive transcendent manner, even though some place different emphases on the degree of this compatibility, and others underline a complicated role for even Satan himself.

At the pastoral level, this study offers two main implications. Firstly, it implies that an individual could be following Jesus without believing in him like Judas did. Secondly, it implies that an active, divinely gifted church leader or church member might apostatise because of a greedy, diabolical character and refusal to heed repeated warnings by God's Spirit.

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