

Reflections on Acts 13:48 – “Appointed to Eternal Life”

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Acts 13:48 (NASB⁹⁵):

“When the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord; and as many as had been appointed to eternal life believed.”

The NET, NIV⁸⁴, NKJV and ESV all say essentially the same thing.

The NRSV is more explicit: “as many as had been destined for eternal life became believers.”

The Greek Text of Verse 48b

Periphrastic Participle
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Perfect of *tassō*

Greek Text: ἐπίστευσαν ὅσοι ἦσαν τεταγμένοι εἰς ζωὴν αἰώνιον.
Transliteration: *episteusan hosoi ēsan tetagmenoi eis zōēn aiōnion.*
Literally: they believed all who had been appointed to life eternal

└─▶ Aorist Indicative Active of πιστεύω (*pisteuō*) = “they believed”

The Relationship of the Verbs in Verse 48b

In the second half of verse 48, we have two verbs. The main verb of the sentence is “believed” (aorist tense of *pisteuō*), while the verb “had been appointed” (a periphrastic participle) modifies the relative adjective “as many” (= “all those who”).¹ By a *periphrastic participle*, we mean a participle that is accompanied by the Greek equative verb *eimi* (is, was, etc.).² The participle itself is *tetagmenoi* (perfect passive participle of τάσσω [*tassō*]). What is significant about these two verbs is the *temporal relationship* they have with one another. The perfect tense verb *tassō* clearly precedes temporally the verb “believed” (which is an aorist tense of *pisteuō*).³ Furthermore, the perfect tense indicates action that happened in the past with continuing results until the time of speaking/reporting. Here is the resulting relationship of the verb tenses:

Luke reports that in the past (from his perspective when he wrote), certain Gentiles at Pisidian Antioch *believed* the gospel message that Paul preached.

Prior to their having believed, they had been *appointed* to eternal life. [The perfect tense of *tassō* stresses that they were appointed to eternal life in the more distant past, and this continued to remain true until the moment they exercised faith (i.e., when they believed)].

¹ For the absolute use of the relative adjective ὅσος (here in the masculine nominative plural, substantival use), see *BDAG* (3rd ed., 729). For Acts 13:48, the lexicon suggests the translation “all those who,” and lists a similar usage in Matt 14:36; Mk 3:10; Acts 4:6, 34; Rom 2:12ab; and 6:3.

² Wallace defines a periphrastic participle in this way: “An anarthrous participle can be used with a verb of being (such as εἶμι or ὑπάρχω) to form a finite verbal idea. This participle is called periphrastic because it is a *round-about* way of saying what could be expressed by a single verb” (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, 649).

³ The aorist tense sums up the action of the verb, viewing it as completed action in the past.

Comments on the Lexical Meaning of the Verb “appointed” (Gk *tassō*)

The Greek verb *tassō* (τάσσω) occurs as early as the 6th century BC in classical Greek, 84 times in the Septuagint (LXX), and 8 times in the New Testament.⁴ In classical Gk, several nuances are attested such as “assign, appoint” and even by extension that of *ordering*. Silva observes,

But the notion of appointing someone to perform a task naturally extends to the sense ‘to order’ (e.g., Soph. *Oed. col.* 638–39: σέ νιν τάξω φυλάσσειν, ‘I will appoint/command you to protect him’; Hdt. 3.25.2: τοὺς παρεόντας αὐτοῦ τάξας ὑπομένειν, ‘ordering those who were with him to remain’; cf. the various senses of Eng. *to order*).⁵

Of the 85 times that *tassō* (τάσσω) occurs in the Greek Septuagint, it most often stands for the Hebrew verb שׁוּב (šîm), “to place, appoint.”

Regarding New Testament usage, it is used once of Jesus “designating” a mountain for the disciples to go to after His resurrection (Matt 28:16). Otherwise, it is used four times of human actions (e.g., setting a date to do something, Acts 28:23), and three times of divine action: Acts 13:48; 22:10; and Rom 13:1. In the case of the latter two, it is clearly God’s *sovereign determining will* that is in view. He has *ordered* something to happen. It is happening according to His plan and purpose, independent of any outside agency . . . simply because *He has willed it* to be so. Acts 22:10 is perhaps most instructive about the meaning of *tassō* in Acts 13:48: “And I said, ‘What shall I do, Lord?’ And the Lord said to me, ‘Get up and go on into Damascus, and there you will be told of all that has been appointed for you to do.’” Paul’s career of service had been *divinely assigned* by God before He even began his ministry (i.e., by God’s decretive will).

Conclusions

The lexical meaning of *tassō* is quite clear when used of divine actions in the New Testament. In such cases, the idea of God’s *sovereign determining will* is in view. He *appoints/orders* what He wishes to happen, and having done so, it comes to pass in accordance with His purposes. Hence, the translation “appoint” is substantiated in the case of Acts 13:38, and the NRSV “destined” accurately reflects the point of the verse. Furthermore, the syntax of the verbs of the sentence clearly establish that God’s appointing of these Gentiles to eternal life *preceded* the time when they exercised faith by “believing” the gospel message that was preached to them. A careful study of Acts 13:48 alone does not necessarily prove individual election and predestination, since that theology must result from the study of a great many New Testament passages (primarily Eph 1 and Rom 8–9). However, Acts 13:48 does seem to support such a viewpoint, and should be added to John 6:44–45,65 and Acts 16:14 in support of divine individual election to salvation.

With this interpretation of Acts 13:48, Darrell Bock concurs:

“Here it refers to God’s sovereign work over salvation, where God has assigned those who come to eternal life (BAGD 806 §1b; BDAG 991 §1b). The passive voice indicates that God does the assigning. It is as strong a passage on God’s sovereignty as anywhere in Luke-Acts and has OT and Jewish roots Just as God was the major active agent in the events of Israel’s history earlier in the speech, so he is the active agent in bringing Gentiles to himself” (*Acts*, Baker Academic, 465).

⁴ The eight NT occurrences are Matt 28:16; Lk 7:8; Acts 13:48; 15:2; 22:10; 28:23; Rom 13:1; and 1 Cor 16:15.

⁵ Silva, M. (ed.). *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Second Edition, Vol. 4, p. 460). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014.