

What Has Been Determined (ἐπέθυσαν) 1 Peter 2:8?

By Armin J. Panning

The Prophet Isaiah received a very challenging assignment from the Lord. Among other unpleasantries, he was also instructed to tell Israel that her reaching out for an alliance with the heathen nation of Assyria amounted to a fatal rejection of her covenant God. In highly picturesque language Isaiah warns:

“Because this people has rejected
the gently flowing waters of Shiloah
and rejoices over Rezin
and the son of Remaliah,
therefore the Lord is about to bring against them
the mighty floodwaters of the River—
the king of Assyria with all his pomp.
It will overflow all its channels,
run over all its banks
and sweep on into Judah, swirling over it,
passing through it and reaching up to the neck (Is 8:6,7).

Rank and file members of the Jewish nation regarded such talk as treason and "conspiracy." The Lord, however, instructed his prophet:

“Do not call conspiracy
everything that these people call conspiracy;
do not fear what they fear,
and do not dread it.
The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy,
he is the one you are to fear,
he is the one you are to dread,
and he will be a sanctuary (Is. 8:12-14).

Through this message the Lord was earnestly reaching out to his chosen and beloved people with the promise that he, the Lord Almighty, would still be their sanctuary, if only they would have him. But all of that was to no avail. Stubborn resistance to God's gracious call left Isaiah no choice but to continue:

But for both houses of Israel he will be
a stone that causes men to stumble
and a rock that makes them fall.
And for the people of Jerusalem he will be
a trap and a snare.
Many of them will stumble;
they will fall and be broken,
they will be snared and captured (Is. 8:14,15).

Was it God's will that they should fall? Did he *cause them to stumble*? Many translations lean toward that interpretation. The NASB, translating literally, softens that idea somewhat when it renders the passage:

Then He shall become a sanctuary;
 But to both the houses of Israel, a stone to strike and a rock to stumble over,
 And a snare and a trap for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.
 And many will stumble over them,
 Then they will fall and be broken;
 They will even be snared and caught.

This is a much more literal translation of the Hebrew construct phrases "a stone of striking" and "a rock of stumbling," but is a literal translation the only defense against misunderstanding? Not necessarily. The New Testament serves as a commentary on this passage, twice using Isaiah 8:14 in reference to Christ. In describing his unbelieving Jewish kinsmen at Romans 9:32, Paul alludes to Isaiah 8 with the expression, προσέκοψαν τῷ λίθῳ τοῦ προσκόμματος ["they stumbled over the stone of stumbling"] and in the next verse he supplements that with a quotation from Isaiah 28:16. Peter in the second chapter of his first letter inverts the order, first quoting Isaiah 28 in verse 6 and then at verse 7 & 8 adding,

λίθος προσκόμματος
 καὶ πέτρα σκανδάλου

οἱ προσκόπτουσιν τῷ λόγῳ ἀπειθοῦντες εἰς ὃ καὶ ἐτέθησαν.

Here also many translations inject a causal idea when they render Peter's Isaiah 8 quotation as "a stone that *causes* men to stumble and rock that *makes* them fall." Is it possible that Christ could be the cause of people's falling? In one sense that can certainly be said. Speaking of the Babe in his arms Simeon says, "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel," Ἴδου οὗτος κείται εἰς πτώσιν καὶ ἀνάστασιν πολλῶν ἐν τῷ Ἰσραὴλ (Luke 2:34). Κείται doubles as the passive of τίθημι, so this statement could be translated literally, "This child *is set* for the falling and rising of many in Israel."

Neutrality over against Christ is impossible. Hence it has rightly been observed that Christ's gospel invitation never leaves the hearer the same. The invitation either creates or strengthens faith in the hearer, or it hardens him and increases his antipathy to the message. Thus it can be said that in a real sense Christ and his gospel can "cause" a person to stumble. Jesus himself says as much. Referring to his Jewish countrymen who refused to receive him, he says, "If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however, they have no excuse for their sin.... If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin (John 15:22,24).

Christ's gracious activity actually heightened their guilt and hardened their resistance. But was it God's intent that the hearers should stumble and be lost? Not at all! Peter lays his finger on the real cause when he says, οἱ προσκόπτουσιν τῷ λόγῳ ἀπειθοῦντες ["they stumble, being disobedient to the Word"]. It was their unbelief and stubborn resistance that was the problem.

But someone might still ask, Was it God's intent that they should be unbelievers? Did he determine (τίθημι) that up front? After all, Peter does indeed say, εἰς ὃ καὶ ἐτέθησαν ["for which they were set"]. But here we must ask, What is it for which they were set? Most translations are not quite as blunt as the RSV with its rendering, "They stumble because they disobey the word, *as they were destined to do*," but very many translations leave wide open the idea that the problem may originate from God's side of the equation.

Is divine reprobation, however, what the εἰς ὃ refers to? Not necessarily. We have here an instance where the verses under discussion include no single word that is in the neuter accusative singular and so can serve as the antecedent of the pronoun ὃ. Hence this is a situation where the pronoun is best taken as referring to a *concept* that must be gained from a study of the context, both the nearer and the wider contexts. (For parallel

cases of a neuter pronoun referring to a concept rather than a specific neuter word as its antecedent, look ahead to verses 21 and 22 of this chapter, where *τοῦτο* refers to the concept of doing good and suffering for it. Examples from Paul's letters can be found at Colossians 1:29 and Second Thessalonians 2:14).

So what is the concept to which the *εἰς ὃ* is here referring? While grammar and the immediate context would allow the sense that God has up front determined (*ἐπέθησαν*) the fate of some by consigning them to perdition, the larger context of Scripture categorically rules that out. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament have unmistakably clear statements that God earnestly desires *all* people to be saved. Through his prophet Ezekiel the Lord says, "As surely as I live... I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live." (Ezekiel 33:11; cf. also 18:32). The Apostle Paul is just as pointed when he writes to Timothy about our Savior God "who wants *all* men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:4). Scripture knows of no God who has from eternity condemned some to perdition.

If the larger context of Scripture rules out the thought that God has from the beginning consigned some to unbelief and perdition, to what then does the *εἰς ὃ* refer? What is it that has been determined (*ἐπέθησαν*)? The Scriptures make it very plain that there is an inseparable connection between unbelief and the punishment for unbelief. In the case of unbelievers there invariably is a "stumbling" and a "falling" that leads to eternal death. However, what has been determined is not that some should be unbelievers, but that their unbelief will be punished. God will not be mocked (Ga 6:7). At his ascension the risen and triumphant Christ not only said, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved," but he added the dreadful and the inevitable corollary, "Whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16). Neither of those statements brook any exception. Both have been "set."

The bulk of our discussion has been about the force of the verb *τίθημι* as used in the expression *εἰς ὃ ἐπέθησαν*, drawn from Isaiah 8. Let us not fail to take into account also the binding and unchangeable force of that verb as it is used in connection with God's determination to save. Recall that Peter introduced the section we're looking at with a quotation from Isaiah 28. There we hear the Lord solemnly asserting:

ἴδου τίθημι ἐν Σιών λίθον
ἀκρογωνιαῖον ἐκλεκτὸν ἔντιμον
καὶ ὁ πιστεύων ἐπ' αὐτῷ οὐ μὴ καταισχυθῆ.

See, I lay [set] a stone in Zion,
a chosen and precious cornerstone,
and the one who trusts in him
will never be put to shame."

Τίθημι ("I have *determined*; I have *designated* my Savior") is placed in the emphatic position at the head of the sentence. The combined force of both the verb's meaning and its position is reinforced by the forceful expression *οὐ μὴ καταισχυθῆ* in the other position of emphasis, namely, at the close of the sentence. Recall also that *οὐ μὴ* with either the future indicative or the aorist subjunctive, as here, is the strongest future negation that the Greek language is capable of. Hence Peter quotes Isaiah as saying: God has determined that Christ is the Savior of the world, and under no circumstances will the believer in him ever be put to shame. Isaiah's, and Peter's, double use of *τίθημι* tells us that both statements are invariably and unalterably true: The believer will be saved; the unbeliever will be lost.

To summarize our discussion of particularly the latter half of that statement involving the lost, how should we render Peter's statement, *εἰς ὃ καὶ ἐπέθησαν*? Perhaps the clearest handling of this passage is to be

found in a translation not much used among us, and not always highly regarded when it is used. But the *Living Bible*, with its paraphrastic style, speaks clearly here when it says, "They will stumble because they will not listen to God's Word, nor obey it, and so this punishment must follow -- that they will fall."

Not man's unbelief, but the punishment for unbelief has been determined (ἐτέθησαν). As surely as a gracious and merciful God saves the believer, so surely also does he punish the unbeliever. A just and a holy God can do no other.