

What does “election” mean in the Old Testament?

A Series on Election: Part 1

While there are two Greek word groups that describe the act of choosing in the New Testament, the group "eklegomai" is the one that is theologically important to "election". To examine the Hebrew thought on this subject, one can correlate the corresponding Hebrew words that the Greek words are translated from by comparing the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament) with the Hebrew Bible.

There are three main Greek words that comprise the eklegomai word group:

Eklegomai means “to choose” or “pick out for oneself”.

Eklektos means “chosen” or “picked out” by someone.

Eklogē means “picking out”, “election” or “selection”.

What is of particular interest is the absence of the noun “eklogē” throughout the whole Septuagint. Because no nouns of the “eklegomai” word group exists in the Septuagint, the action of the verbal forms place an emphasis on the person who chooses and the one being chosen.

The Hebrew terms associated with the “eklegomai” word group are **bāḥar** and **bāḥûr**, and the focus of this article will be on the use of these terms in the context of God deciding on means and ways by choosing from what is possible.

Bāḥar

In the majority of places where “bāḥar” is found, it is usually in reference to God’s action of choosing. It demonstrates God’s act of choosing what He considers to be most suitable for the fulfillment of His purposes.

God chose one place for worship and sacrifices.

but at the place where the LORD your God chooses (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) to establish His name, you shall sacrifice the Passover in the evening at sunset, at the time that you came out of Egypt. (Deut 16:6)

that you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground which you bring in from your land that the LORD your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God chooses (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) to establish His name. (Deut 26:2)

God chose the city of Jerusalem.

"However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son for the sake of My servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem which I have chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**).” (1 Ki 11:13)

(but he will have one tribe, for the sake of My servant David and for the sake of Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) from all the tribes of Israel), (1 Ki 11:32)

Now Rehoboam the son of Solomon reigned in Judah Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he became king, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city which the LORD had chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) from all the tribes of Israel to put His name there. And his mother's name was Naamah the Ammonitess. (1 Ki 14:21)

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"When Your people go out to battle against their enemies, by whatever way You shall send them, and they pray to You toward this city which You have chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) and the house which I have built for Your name, (2 Chron 6:34)

if they return to You with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their captivity, where they have been taken captive, and pray toward their land which You have given to their fathers and the city which You have chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**), and toward the house which I have built for Your name, (2 Chron 6:38)

So King Rehoboam strengthened himself in Jerusalem and reigned. Now Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem, the city which the LORD had chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) from all the tribes of Israel, to put His name there. And his mother's name was Naamah the Ammonites. (2 Chron 12:13)

God chose individuals for a purpose. While some passages may suggest that God chose a person for salvation, this view contradicts God's choice of Abraham after he demonstrated a faith in God by placing a trust His word (Gen 12:4), and God's choice of the nation of Israel if they listen and obey His word (Ex 19:4-6). It is through this context, that God chose to be God to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 17:7), that God's election must be understood.

God chose Saul to be king over Israel.

Now a day before Saul's coming, the LORD had revealed this to Samuel saying, "About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin and you shall anoint him to be prince over my people Israel; and he will deliver My people from the hand of the Philistines. For I have regarded My people, because of their cry has come to Me." When Samuel saw Saul, the LORD said to him, "Behold, the man whom I spoke to you! This one shall rule over My people." (1 Sam 9:15-17)

Samuel said to all the people, "Do you see him whom the LORD has chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**)? Surely there is no one like him among all the people." So all the people shouted and said, "Long live the king!" (1 Sam 10:24)

God chose David to be king over Israel.

Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, "The LORD has not chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) this one either." Next Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, "The LORD has not chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) this one either." Thus Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. But Samuel said to Jesse, "The LORD has not chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) these." (1 Sam 16:8-10)

'Since the day that I brought My people Israel from Egypt, I did not choose (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) a city out of all the tribes of Israel in which to build a house that My name might be there, but I chose David to be over My people Israel.' (1 Ki 8:16)

'Nevertheless I will not take the whole kingdom out of his hand, but I will make him ruler all the days of his life, for the sake of My servant David whom I chose (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**), who observed My commandments and My statutes; (1 Ki 11:34)

It is important to note that while the Bible mentions their election, the heroes of Israel (i.e. Abraham [Neh 9:7], Moses [Ps 106:23], Zerubbabel [Hag 2:23], etc.) never had the sense of pride in being elected. In a similar fashion, the prophets of the Old Testament never felt elected or concerned with the divine process that led to their commission. Their concern was exclusively with the command, "go prophesy" (Amos 7:15).

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From individuals, God chose a group of people for his purposes.

God chose the nation of Israel because of love for Abraham and His commitment to His Covenant to be God of Abraham and his descendants. In Israel, God has raised up men to proclaim His will and to summon to right and righteousness to a life in obedience to God.

"Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) their descendants after them And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power, (Deut 4:37)

"The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, (Deut 7:7)

"For you are a holy people to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. (Deut 14:2)

"But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**), Descendant of Abraham My friend, (Isa 41:8)

"You are My witnesses," declares the LORD, And My servant whom I have chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**), So that you may know and believe Me And understand that I am He Before Me there was no God formed, And there will be none after Me. (Isa 43:10)

God chose which tribe would be His priests to the nation of Israel.

"For the LORD your God has chosen (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) him and his sons from all your tribes, to stand and serve in the name of the LORD forever. (Deut 18:5)

'Did I not choose (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) them from all the tribes of Israel to be My priests, to go up to My altar, to burn incense, to carry an ephod before Me; and did I not give to the house of your father all the fire offerings of the sons of Israel? (1 Sam 2:28)

Then David said, "No one is to carry the ark of God but the Levites; for the LORD chose (Heb: **bāḥar** Gr: **eklegomai**) them to carry the ark of God and to minister to Him forever." (1 Chron 15:2)

The main use of "bāḥar" is to indicate God's choice of Israel, as descendants of Abraham, as His elect nation. God's chose Israel, because of His unmerited love and His faithfulness to the promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Deut 7:6-7). And the election of Jacob and Israel is reaffirmed in the psalms and prophets (Ps 47:4; 135:4; Isa 41:8; 44:1-2; Ezek 20:5). The patriarchal history was proof of God's love working itself out in the election of His children. God's only concern is about righteousness and fidelity.

Bāḥûr

While "bāḥar" places an emphasis on the choosing action of God, this participle of "bāḥar" places an emphasis on the quality of the object chosen. A participle can be understood as a verbal adjective.

From the cities on that day the sons of Benjamin were numbered, 26,000 men who draw the sword, besides the inhabitants of Gibeah who were numbered, 700 choice (Heb: **bāḥûr** Gr: **eklektos**) men. (Judg 20:15)

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Then Saul took three thousand chosen (Heb: **bāḥûr** Gr: **eklektos**) men from all Israel and went to seek David and his men in front of the Rocks of the Wild Goats. (1 Sam 24:2)

Moreover, Amaziah assembled Judah and appointed them according to their fathers' households under commanders of thousands and commanders of hundreds throughout Judah and Benjamin; and he took a census of those from twenty years old and upward and found them to be 300,000 choice (Heb: **bāḥûr** Gr: **eklektos**) men, able to go to war and handle spear and shield. (2 Chron 25:5)

It is significant to note that "bāḥûr" is never used of Israel as the chosen people. The emphasis of God's choice never attaches any importance to or on the "elite" status of the nation. The use of "bāḥar", instead of "bāḥûr", emphasizes the grace of God sovereign choice and His faithfulness to His unconditional covenant.

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