

## Free Will - Part II

By: [William B. McDonald](#) Posted: May 31 2005

It is clear that the traditional teachings of the Apostles' Creed are accepted as God's truth and embraced by almost all Christian scholars. This doctrine stands in the way of evaluating Jewish sources as a means for biblical and cognitive growth. An example of this can be seen in the words of S. Schechter who wrote in *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, on the subject of Rabbinic Parallels to the New Testament. He writes:

"The best thing to be done at present is, that Christians should devote themselves to the study of Rabbinic literature. The history which would be written after such a study would certainly be more scientific and more critical." [32]

In the teachings of Rabbinic literature, Rabbi Akiba said in Avoth 3, Mishnah 15: "All is foreseen [by God], yet freedom of choice is granted; and by grace is the universe judged, yet all is according to the amount of the work." [33] R. Akiba is addressing himself to the concept of free will and points out that all is foreseen by God. This implied a degree of total control, and yet man still has the ability to choose freely. R. Akiba, in saying "all is foreseen [by God]," embraces a type of control in which the first element being God, controls all conditions surrounding the role of the second element. Thereby, the first party's will is forced upon the will of the second party. How then can the second party experience free will?

When the argument is reduced to saying that man is not free because of God being all foreseeing, a great injustice is done. It is like saying a person has the right to walk but not the right to run, or the right to stand, but not to walk. These functions superimpose themselves upon each other. Why? Because, within the order of creation, there is a process of evaluation taking place for the distinct purpose of the development of man. While God is the essence of the order of creation, man is free to choose which path best serves the order of that purpose. Bruce Metzger wrote in Sirach 15:11-20:

"Do not say, 'Because of the Lord, I left the right way;' for he will not do what he hates. Do not say, 'It was he who led me astray,' for he has no need of a sinful man. The Lord hates all abominations, and they are not loved by those who fear him. It was he who created man in the beginning, and he left him in the power of his own inclination. If you will, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own choice. He has placed before you fire and water; stretch out your hand for whichever you wish. Before a man are life and death, and whichever he chooses will be given to him for great is the wisdom of the Lord; he is mighty in power and seen in everything; his eyes are on those who fear him, and he knows every deed of men. He has not commanded any one to be ungodly and he has not given anyone permission to sin. [34] Verse 14 says that 'it was he who created man in the beginning, and he left him in the power of his own inclination.'"

According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, "The grand premise of religion is that man is able to surpass himself. Such ability is the essence of

freedom." [35] Heschel used two words to denote the essence of free will, "process" and "event," process being the element which limits freedom and event being the rare moments whereby freedom takes place. [36] For Heschel:

"To believe in freedom is to believe in events, namely to maintain that man is able to escape the bonds of the processes in which he is involved and to act in a way not necessitated by antecedent factors." [37]

Heschel seems to have acknowledged, in the above statement, the saying of R. Akiba, "All is foreseen [by God], yet freedom of choice is granted." George Foot Moore's book, *Judaism*, confirmed Heschel's position when he wrote:

"Power [of self-determination] is given [by God] to every man. If he chooses to turn himself to a good way and to become righteous, the power is his: if he chooses to turn himself to an evil way and become wicked, the power is his. This is what is written in the Law, 'Behold, the man is become like one of us, to know good and evil' (Genesis 3:22). That is to say, this species, mankind, has become unique in the world; there is no second one resembling it in this respect that, of itself, by its intelligence and reflection, knows what is good and what is evil and does whichever it chooses, and there is no one who restrains it from doing the good or the evil." [38]

God has set within the order of creation, by Law, a natural progression by which man attains the highest purpose of life. The question of whether man is truly free evolved from man's inability to understand an all-foreseeing God. If God is all foreseeing, men state, how then can man be free, without having or experiencing God forcing his will upon them? Thus, the establishment of a philosophical argument, which has and is a paradox to mankind.

To understand this paradox, we must begin with the order that was set in Genesis 1:26 when God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth. In order for man to have dominion over the earth, there must be a naturally progressing element by which he has the freedom to do so. To assume that man has no free will is to assume that the order of creation was false.

Free will is nothing more than the offspring, the outgrowth, the natural progression of an order that was set in order for man to attain the highest purpose of life. Each action man takes, produces positive and negative results and shapes the dimension by which man lives. Heschel wrote that:

"Man's ability to transcend the self, to rise above all natural ties and bonds, presupposes further that every man lives in a realm governed by law and necessity as well as in a realm of creative possibilities. It presupposes his belonging to a dimension that is higher than nature, society, and the self, and accepts the reality of such a dimension beyond the natural order. Freedom does not mean the right to live as we please. It means the power to live spiritually, to rise to a higher level of existence." [39]

This position of Heschel seems to only embrace part of the reality that is true. To imply freedom beyond the realm of creation would make man equal to God. Therefore, the argument is weak and in some ways a displacement of the purpose of God. Heschel seems to think that man attains true freedom when his spiritual self breaks through the order of creation. Heschel calls this spiritual ecstasy. I think that creation embraces both the natural and the spiritual order; thereby placing man in a realm wherein he rises above his natural environment, his social society, and even his selfish desires.

The order of creation has set the course to which man lives. The concept of free will is a natural outgrowth of *yetzer hatov*, and *yetzer harah*. Just as these two elements produce free will, so, too, does free will produce the outgrowth of needs. In Abraham J. Heschel's book, *Man is not Alone*, he writes:

"The will would remain dormant in human nature if not for the fact that there is a way in which it is constantly aroused. The way is the experience of needs, the feeling of pressure and urgency arising from internal or external causes, for the satisfaction of which man must bring his latent forces into action."

Needs, then, are man's system of communication with his inside and outside world. They report of the consciousness of the necessities of living, but they also determine the aims he selects for planning and action.

For thus it can be said, the order of creation has within its realm the natural progression of human existence. Creation also has the elements of digression, whereby man's choices will produce for him the lowest order of life. Genesis 4:7 sets before man the knowledge of existence. Nothing is stagnant; nothing that has life can remain the same. That is why the ability to choose had to exist. Man and man alone chooses the level of his existence. God has nothing to do with that choice, other than being the creator of all that exists within the operation or progression of creation. Therefore, man is destined to his choices and to his failure to choose. Man cannot stop the progress of freedom by his choosing not to choose. At this point, man, like Tito Melema, becomes the slave of the condition of his environment, his society. Because these elements are not stagnated, but evolving, they, along with other elements of life, will enslave man. This can be seen in the words of II Esdras 1:28-32:

"For the evil about which you ask me has been sown, but the harvest of it has not yet come. If therefore that which has been sown is not reaped, and if the place where the evil has been sown does not pass away, the field where the good has been sown will not come. For a grain of evil seed was sown in Adam's heart from the beginning and how much ungodliness it has produced until now, and will produce until the time of thrashing comes! Consider now for yourself how much fruit of ungodliness a grain of evil seed had produced. When heads of grain without number are sown, how great a threshing floor they will fill!"[40]

Now to the event where the biblical text says that God hardened the heart of Pharaoh, thereby implying the act of a higher power forcing that higher power's will upon another

will. It must be noted that the elements of evil were already at work within the heart of Pharaoh. Thus, the Hebrew word for he *strengthened*, or he *forced*, as in himself, to be hardened, could also be understood opposite God's will being forced on Pharaoh. The last element of importance is that when God chooses to break through or intervene in His creative order, it is generally not understood as an action of violating the order which he established, even to force His will or any type of counter will upon the will of man's free will. All unexplained circumstances or elements which seem to control man's life are nothing more than the reactions to the choices man makes or does not make.

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NOTES:

[32] S. Schechter, *Rabbinic Parallels to the New Testament*. The Jewish Quarterly Review 12 (1966), 433

[33] Blackman, 513.

[34] Bruce M. Metzger, *The Apocrypha* (New York: The Oxford University Press, 1965), 147

[35] Abraham Joshua Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Cud)

[36] Heschel, 410

[37] *Ibid.*, 410

[38] George Foot Moore, *Judaism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1954), 138

[39] Abraham Joshua Heschel (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1951). 181

[40] Metzger, 30.