

Exegetical Brief Acts 1:26—Lottery Or Election?

John F. Brug

The vast majority of commentaries and translations suggest that the Jerusalem congregation chose a successor for Judas by casting lots. The NIV says:

Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

The Greek text, however, says:

καὶ ἔδωκαν κλήρους αὐτοῖς καὶ ἔπεσεν ὁ κλήπος ἐπὶ Μαθθίαν καὶ συγκατεψηφίσθη μετὰ τῶν ἑνδεκα ἀποστόλων.

And they gave lots to/for them, and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was counted in with the eleven apostles.

The question is whether "giving lots for someone" refers to casting lots or to casting a vote.

Casting Lots

The most common expression for casting lots (βάλλω κλήρους) does not occur in Acts 1:26. The expression βάλλω κλήρους is found in the references to casting lots for Jesus' clothing in the New Testament (Mt 27:35, Mk 15:24, Lk 23:34, Jo 19:24) and in the Greek of Psalm 22:19 (21:19 in LXX). This term is also used for casting lots for the allotment of land and offices in the Old Testament. Other verbs for the action of casting lots are ἐμβάλλω κλήρον (ἐνέβαλεν αὐτοῖς Ἰησοῦς κλήρον, "Joshua cast a lot for them"—Jos 18:10) Or ἐκφέρω κλήρον (ἐξοίσω ὑμῖν κλήρον, "I will cast a lot for you"—Jos 18:6) and λαγχάνω (λάχωμεν περὶ αὐτούς, "let us cast lots for it"-John 19:24) or κληρώ (κληροῦται Ἰωναθᾶν καὶ Σαοῦλ, "Jonathan and Saul were chosen by lot" 1 Sam 14:41). The noun κλήρος may refer either to the lot itself, to the casting of lots, to the allotment or office that was assigned by the lot, or simply to any assigned portion. The last meaning is the most common in the New Testament. Ironically Judas is said to have received the allotment of his ministry "by lot" (ἔλαχεν τὸν κλήρον τῆς διακονίας ταύτης—Acts 1:17). Surely there was no casting of lots involved in this case. The NIV simply translates "he shared in this ministry."

The Hebrew verbs for casting lots are נָפַל (cast), נָפַל (let fall), and שָׁלַח (throw). Other verbs which indicate that the lots were sometimes shaken out of a container are שָׁלַח (cast out), הָלַח (go up), and צָא (come out). The method used by the Jews was to place stones with the participants' names on them into a vessel and to shake it until one lot came out. The Hebrew noun is לֶרְגֵל . Like κλήρος it can refer to the lot itself or to the portion assigned by the lot.

Giving a Lot To/For Someone

Thus we see that none of the common idioms for the act of casting lots occurs in Acts 1:26. If the phrase ἔδωκαν κλήρους αὐτοῖς refers to the process of casting lots at all, it probably refers to assigning a certain lot or token to a person (analogous to assigning "heads" to one person and "tails" to the other) rather than to the actual casting of the lot (flipping the coin). The lots assigned to the individuals entered in the lottery could be objects with their name on, objects of different color, or objects with some other differentiating mark or shape. However, the Greek verb for this process in a parallel passage of Scripture is not δίδωμι ("give a lot") but ἐπιτίθημι ("place a lot upon"). In Leviticus 16:8 ἐπιτίθημι κλήρον ἐπὶ is the idiom used when lots are assigned to the two

goats in the lottery for choosing a scapegoat. The Hebrew, however has וַיִּתֵּן אֶתְהֵרֹן עַל־שְׁנֵי הַשְּׂעִירִים גֹּרָל לְאֹהֲרֹן, "and Aaron gave upon the two goats lots," almost an exact agreement with Acts 1:26. In Joshua 17:14 "to give a lot to someone" means "to give an allotment, a portion, to him" (מַדְּמָה עָלַי לָמָּה נִתְּתָה לִי גֹרָל לְאֹהֲרֹן—why have you given to me as an inheritance [only] one lot).

In passages other than Acts 1:26, when δίδωμι is combined with κλήρος in the idiom "to give a lot to someone," the meaning is not "to cast lots," nor does it mean "assign a lot to." In Numbers 16:14 "to give a lot to someone" (ἔδωκας ἡμῖν κλήρον) means to "assign an allotment to someone." A similar expression occurs in Joshua 14:3 (τοῖς Λευίταις οὐκ ἔδωκεν κλήρον—"to the Levites he did not give an allotment"). Thus the most natural translation of ἔδωκαν κλήρους αὐτοῖς in Acts 1:26 would be "they gave allotments to them," but this does not fit the context. The translation "they assigned lots to them" is supported by a literal translation from the Hebrew of Leviticus 16:8.

Giving To Someone By Lot

The Greek idiom for determining an assignment by casting lots is not "to give a lot to someone" but "to give something to someone by lot" (ὕμῖν γὰρ δέδωκα τὴν γῆν αὐτῶν ἐν κλήρῳ, "for to you I have given their land by lot—Nu 33:53). Alternate expressions for this are κατακλήρονομέω τὴν γῆν ἐν κλήρῳ or μετὰ κλήρου—"to assign an allotment by lot or with a lot" (Nu 33:54, Nu 34:13) and κληρονομέω κατὰ κλήρον—"to assign an allotment according to lot" (Jos 12:7).

The term for the falling of a lot for someone is "the lot came out" (ἐξῆλθεν ὁ κλήρος—Jos 18:11) or "the lot fell" (ἔπεσεν ὁ κλήρος ἐπὶ Ἰῶναν--Jon 1:7). Note that this last term is parallel to Acts 1:26.

Voting

The rare verb συγκαταψηφίζομαι seems to mean "to join in a vote." καταψηφίζομαι originally referred primarily to negative votes but came to apply to any vote. Here in Acts 1:26 the passive seems to mean "to be voted in with." In the New Testament other terms for voting or choosing some one are χειροτονέω (2 Cor 8:19) and καταφέρω ψῆφον, "cast a ballot against" (Acts 26:10). In classical usage a selection by ψῆφος indicated a choice made by a vote rather than by a lottery, but this meaning may not always be present in later usage.

Conclusion

Almost alone, the GWN translates Acts 1:26, "They provided lots for both of them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was chosen by vote to be added to the eleven apostles." The possibility that this verse could refer to a vote is supported by the *Anchor Bible: Acts* (p 10) and by Jackson and Lake (*The Acts*, IV, 15). Can this rendering be justified by the evidence we have examined?

In favor of the view that this verse refers to election by ballot is the fact that ἔδωκαν κλήρους αὐτοῖς is not one of the regular terms for casting lots and the verb συγκαταψηφίζομαι seems to refer to voting. If this is the case, the κλήρους referred to would be the balloting counters given to the voters to deposit in the "ballot box." "The lot fell upon Matthias" would mean that he got the most votes and so the office was allotted to him. Also supporting this view is the variant which replaces αὐτοῖς with αὐτῶν, found in the Textus Receptus, D*, E, Y, and most minuscules. This could be translated "they gave their lots" and would refer to the voters' placing their tokens into the container.

Favoring the interpretation that the reference is to drawing lots rather than giving ballots is the fact that ἔπεσεν ὁ κλήρος ἐπὶ elsewhere refers to the falling of a lot.

It seems that the linguistic evidence is inconclusive, perhaps slightly favoring a vote. The common precedent of casting lots in Israel probably tips the balance toward the theory that Acts 1:26 refers to the casting of lots rather than the casting of ballots. But the evidence for a lottery in Acts 1:26 is much less decisive than the near unanimous verdict of the commentaries and translations would suggest.

Lottery or election? Whichever method was used was sure to produce a suitable successor to Judas since only candidates with all the necessary qualifications had been nominated for the office.