

# Jot & Tittle

*A Journal Devoted to the Study of the Inspired Word of God*

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## **Casting Lots and Discerning God's Will**

by Dana L. Goodnough

Discerning God's will for an individual decision or for the direction of a church can be challenging. Wouldn't it be easier to simply "cast lots" and leave the decision in the providential hands of God? After all, Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord." However, such a simplistic approach to decision making might violate the clear teaching of the New Testament regarding the necessity of prayer, revealed truth, and spiritual discernment. Is casting lots appropriate for Christians today?

### *Ancient Lots, Dice, and Discs*

Casting lots was certainly prevalent in ancient times, whether in regard to making personal or military decisions or simply as a part of games of entertainment. Archaeologists have uncovered samples of ancient dice and gaming discs.

"Sets of playing pieces have been found in Egypt, Mesopotamia and Palestine. An ivory die dating to the seventeenth century BC was found at Tell Beit Mirsim, together with a set of ten movable pieces . . . . Knucklebones and small tops or discs which could be spun with the fingers were sometimes used instead of dice. A pyramid-shaped

ivory die or teetotum, pierced on four sides with varying numbers of holes from one to four, was also found there."<sup>1</sup>

It's unclear what form the casting of lots described in the Bible took, whether dice, discs, or some other gaming piece. "Most of the board games seem to have been played with dice—either a two-sided die in the form of a disc or a four-sided die in the shape of a pyramid."<sup>2</sup> The use of these dice or discs seems to have been based on color combinations. "The casting of lots was probably interpreted along these lines: two dark sides up meant no, while two light sides up meant yes. A combination of a light and a dark side might have meant that one should throw again."<sup>3</sup> In regard to decision making, the lot would provide a response to simple yes-no questions.

### *The Pagan Use of Lots*

The Bible and historical documents both describe the casting of lots among pagan people in ancient times. Biblical examples include armies, kings, sailors, and soldiers. Conquering enemies of the Jewish people at times cast lots to divide up Jewish captives as slaves (Joel 3:3; Nahum 3:10). Invading armies partitioned off Jerusalem and its spoils by casting lots (Obadiah 11). Ezekiel prophesied that the king of Babylon would choose to attack Jerusalem based on the casting of lots (Ezekiel 21:21-22). Sailors correctly identified the disobedient prophet Jonah as the source of a life-threatening storm by casting lots (Jonah 1:7). Haman cast lots to determine the timing of his planned eradication of the Jews from the Persian Empire in the days of Esther (Esther 3:7; 9:24). Roman soldiers cast lots to divide up Jesus' clothing among themselves at the cross (Matthew 27:35).

### *The Jewish Use of Lots*

Casting lots to make decisions wasn't restricted to pagan people in ancient times. Even God's people used this method under various circumstances. "On the Day of Atonement, Aaron chose by lot a scapegoat to bear the sins of the people in the wilderness (cf. Lev 16:7-10, 21-22). After the conquest, Palestine was divided by casting lots (cf. Josh 14:2; 18:6; 1 Chron 6:54ff.); Jonathan's

breaking of Saul's hasty vow was discovered by lot (1 Samuel 14:41-42); and the service of the Jerusalem temple was regulated by the casting of lots (Neh 10:34ff.).<sup>4</sup> Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, was chosen by lot to enter the Temple and offer the priestly offerings (Luke 1:9). Clearly, the ancient Jews regarded casting lots as a legitimate way to discern God's direction in certain settings (Proverbs 16:33; 18:18), and God honored this method when it was used appropriately.

### ***Spiritual Discernment in the Church Era***

The question that is most perplexing relates to the use of casting lots in the modern church era. Should Christians attempt to discover God's will by casting lots today? According to Acts 1:26, the apostles identified a replacement for Judas through prayer and casting lots. But was this incident prescriptive or merely descriptive?

This pericope on the selection of Matthias has a number of significant implications. In the first place, it shows the necessity of a hermeneutical methodology that is able to distinguish between normative principles and culturally restricted practices in the progressive revelation of the Bible. We are exhorted as Christians to "search the Scriptures" and to "know what is the will of the Lord"—exhortations that are normative.<sup>5</sup>

Since ancient Judaism accepted the casting of lots as a legitimate method of determining God's will, it isn't surprising that the apostles, who were themselves Jews living within this ancient Jewish cultural context, would employ this method in their context.

However, it's impossible not to notice that the apostles' use of lots preceded the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Nowhere after that supernatural invasion of God by which He formed a constant, vital relationship with His people does the Bible speak of the church determining God's will by casting lots. Instead, the emphasis fell on prophetic revelation, written Scripture, prayer, and personal spiritual discernment. "In the church empowered by the Spirit, God speaks through that Spirit. It is therefore no wonder that in such a context the lot and similar indirect

means of discerning the divine will (such as seeking omens from God like Gideon's fleece) were relegated to history."<sup>6</sup>

Discovering God's will today will best come through a prayerful process of discernment. Paul stated that he prayed for the believers in Colosse to understand God's will (Colossians 1:9). James 1:5 instructs us to pray for divine wisdom, a command that would apply to discovering God's direction. The Holy Spirit also leads His people, helping believers to know and accomplish God's will (Romans 8:14; Galatians 5:18). First Corinthians 2:14 links the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer with spiritual discernment. In Philippians 1:9-10 Paul links spiritual growth with spiritual discernment. We can be thankful that God hasn't left His guiding work in our lives to the throw of the dice! Instead, we can discern His will through prayerful, Spirit guided discernment.

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, J. A. *Handbook of Life in Bible Times*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986, p. 259.

<sup>2</sup> Gower, Ralph. *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1987, p. 302.

<sup>3</sup> Kaiser, Walter C., Jr.; Davids, Peter H.; Bruce, F. F.; Brauch, Manfred T. *Hard Sayings of the Bible*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996, p. 331.

<sup>4</sup> Longenecker, Richard N. "Acts" in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981, p. 268.

<sup>5</sup> Longenecker, p. 266.

<sup>6</sup> Kaiser, Davids, Bruce, and Brauch, p. 513.