

# Eren Yeager's Free Will in the Perspective of John Calvin

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## **Eren Yeager's Free Will in the Perspective of John Calvin**

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the theme of free will in the character of Eren Yeager from *Attack on Titan* through the lens of John Calvin's theological framework, particularly his doctrines on human nature, predestination, and the limits of human autonomy as articulated in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* and selected sermons. Employing a qualitative literature review, the research integrates theological analysis with cultural interpretation, drawing on both Calvinist texts and contemporary scholarship on the intersection of theology and popular culture. Key narrative moments in Eren's arc, especially his obsession with freedom, the inevitability of his actions, and his ultimate self-sacrifice are interpreted in light of Calvin's understanding of divine sovereignty and compatibilism.

It is important to note that this study does not intend to serve as a doctrinal defense or theological "proof-text" for Calvinism. Rather, the analysis seeks to explore how a popular fictional narrative can function as a lens for reflecting on longstanding theological debates about destiny, moral responsibility, and the human condition. By engaging with Eren's struggle as a "slave to freedom" and his inability to alter a predetermined future, the article invites readers to consider the enduring relevance of theological concepts in contemporary cultural storytelling.

Keywords: Eren Yeager, free will, predestination, John Calvin, theology and anime

## Introduction

The discourse on free will within Christian theology particularly in the Calvinist tradition remains a subject of profound debate and reinterpretation. At the core of Calvinist thought lies the enduring tension between divine sovereignty and human agency, a paradox that challenges modern assumptions about autonomy, choice, and moral accountability. This theological framework finds a striking cultural mirror in the Japanese anime *Attack on Titan* (*Shingeki no Kyojin*, 2013–2023). Its protagonist, Eren Yeager, embodies the existential struggle to reconcile personal will with the apparent inevitability of destiny. Driven by an obsessive longing for freedom and an uncompromising belief in the sovereignty of his own will, Eren ultimately discovers that his most decisive actions are bound within forces larger than himself; forces that seem to predetermine the very path he attempts to resist.

John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (particularly Book II, chapters 1-5), offers a nuanced theology of human nature and free will. While recognizing that humans act voluntarily, Calvin argues that the will is enslaved by sin and cannot achieve true freedom apart from divine grace. This position, often described as compatibilism, asserts that God's sovereignty and human responsibility coexist without contradiction. Far from being an abstract doctrine, such a framework illuminates moral and philosophical dilemmas embedded in narrative worlds like *Attack on Titan*, where Eren's agency, though passionately asserted, appears constrained by an unalterable sequence of events.

Recent scholarship has increasingly turned to anime as a serious site for theological reflection. Hayashi and Anderson (2022) contend that anime is not merely entertainment but a cultural medium where philosophical and theological questions are dramatized through narrative and symbolism. LaChance (2022) emphasizes that anime, even in a predominantly secular or non-Christian society like Japan, frequently employs religious imagery and theological motifs to address moral ambiguity, sacrifice, and existential meaning. Tan (2020) demonstrates that anime narratives can articulate virtues and values resonant with theological traditions, thereby affirming anime as a medium of lived spirituality. Extending this discussion, Knauss (2020) argues that popular culture itself can serve as a *locus theologicus*; a legitimate arena for theological discourse precisely

because it engages audiences in reflecting upon fundamental questions of fate, freedom, and redemption outside traditional ecclesial spaces.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that *Attack on Titan* (anime) provides fertile ground for theological exploration. Its treatment of fate, freedom, and determinism resonates strongly with Calvinist concerns about predestination, providence, and the limits of human autonomy. The narrative's intertwining of Eren's personal will with the metaphysical "Paths" underscores the tension between subjective experience and cosmic inevitability, mirroring the Calvinist view that human choices remain meaningful yet bound within divine decree. Importantly, this study is not an apologetic effort to defend Calvinist doctrine, nor an attempt to force theology upon anime. Rather, it aims to demonstrate how Calvinist theology can serve as a hermeneutical lens to interpret *Attack on Titan*, enriching both theological discourse and cultural analysis. By engaging the anime through this lens, we affirm that Japanese animation is not trivial entertainment but a meaningful cultural text capable of contributing to ongoing theological reflection on freedom, destiny, and human responsibility.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative literature review methodology, combining theological and cultural analysis to examine Eren Yeager's free will through the lens of John Calvin's theology. The primary theological framework is drawn from John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; particularly Book II, chapters 1-5 where Calvin articulates his doctrines on human nature, free will, and divine sovereignty (Calvin, 2011/1559). In addition, selected sermons of Calvin are utilized to provide pastoral and practical interpretations of these themes (Calvin, 2009). To broaden the scope beyond Calvinism, theological perspectives from scholarly works engaging with theology and popular culture, including Hayashi & Anderson (2022), Tan (2020), LaChance (2022), and Knauss (2020), are incorporated.

The cultural text under examination is the Japanese anime *Attack on Titan* (*Shingeki no Kyojin*, 2013–2023). Analytical emphasis is placed on the narrative arc of the protagonist, Eren Yeager, as depicted in the anime adaptation. Key plot points, dialogues, and visual sequences that engage with themes of free will, determinism, providence, and destiny are

identified and interpreted. Importantly, the study deliberately restricts its cultural focus to the anime rather than the manga, in order to maintain a coherent and delimited source base.

The interpretive process employs a theological-pop culture hermeneutic, mapping Calvin's theological concepts such as total depravity, predestination, providence, and compatibilism onto the fictional narrative of *Attack on Titan*. This approach is not intended to impose Calvinist theology onto the anime as an authoritative reading but to explore points of resonance, divergence, and thematic dialogue between Calvinist thought and the philosophical tensions presented in the series. Data for this study is derived from secondary sources, including theological treatises, peer-reviewed journal articles, recorded sermons, and scholarly analyses of anime and popular culture. Each source is evaluated for scholarly credibility and thematic relevance.

The analysis proceeds in an iterative manner, moving back and forth between Calvin's theological texts and the anime narrative to construct a nuanced understanding of how Calvin's doctrines may illuminate aspects of Eren Yeager's struggle with freedom, inevitability, and moral responsibility.

## **Discussion**

The character arc of Eren Yeager in *Attack on Titan* presents a compelling case study for examining the intersection of popular culture and theological determinism. While the series operates within a fictional and fantastical world, Eren's internal struggle resonates deeply with philosophical and theological debates about free will, moral agency, and the inevitability of destiny. Through a Calvinist lens, these tensions can be reframed within the doctrines of divine sovereignty, human depravity, and compatibilism.

In Calvinist thought, the human will is not autonomous in an absolute sense but is bound by the nature of the person and the sovereign decree of God. Calvin asserts that, due to humanity's fallen state, the will is inclined toward sin and incapable of initiating genuine good apart from divine grace (Institutes, II.2.26). This understanding challenges modern, individualistic notions of freedom that emphasize self-determination without constraint. In *Attack on Titan*, Eren repeatedly expresses an obsession with freedom; both for himself

and for humanity, yet finds himself increasingly aware of forces shaping his actions that lie beyond his control.

Eren's journey reflects a form of compatibilism in which human choices remain real and morally significant, yet occur within the boundaries of an overarching determinative framework. Calvin's doctrine of providence maintains that nothing happens apart from the will of God (Institutes, I.16.3), a view that parallels the inescapable causal chain of events in Eren's world. The *Attack on Titan* narrative structure itself, with its time-loop revelations and preordained future memories, mirrors this deterministic perspective suggesting that the future is fixed even as characters act with apparent freedom in the present.

### **1. Eren Can't Alternate the Future**

One of the most striking theological parallels emerges in the series' climactic revelations: Eren's inability to alter the course of events, despite his intense desire for freedom. His power as the Founding Titan grants him unprecedented influence over the past and future, yet this very power reveals that his actions are already embedded in a predetermined sequence. The scenes in which Eren witnesses future events, moments he is powerless to change highlight a narrative fatalism that aligns closely with Calvin's teaching on the certainty of divine decrees.

From a Calvinist perspective, Eren's frustration can be likened to humanity's confrontation with the mystery of predestination. Calvin acknowledges the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, cautioning against speculating beyond what Scripture reveals (Institutes, III.21.1). Similarly, Eren's awareness of his own determinism does not nullify his moral accountability; he continues to make choices that have profound ethical consequences for himself and others, even though those choices are foreordained.

Moreover, Eren's position resembles the Reformed understanding of *compatibilism*; the idea that human choices are genuinely free in the sense that they flow from one's desires and intentions, yet these desires themselves are encompassed within God's eternal plan. His choices, no matter how radical or destructive, unfold precisely as he has foreseen them through fragmented glimpses of the future. Ironically, his quest for absolute liberty

turns into the very chain that binds him, as each decision is a step already fixed in the timeline he has witnessed.

This paradox intensifies when considering Calvin's pastoral counsel on the doctrine of providence: believers are called not to rebel against divine determination, but to rest in the assurance that all things unfold according to God's wise and just purposes. In contrast, Eren resists every fiber of his being, refusing to accept the inevitability of the "future self" he has seen. Yet his rebellion only serves to fulfill that very future, making him a tragic embodiment of the futility of striving against the decrees of a sovereign will.

## **2. Freedom as an Obsession, Not a Reality**

Eren's oft-repeated declaration that he will "destroy all his enemies" to gain freedom serves as a recurring motif throughout the narrative. However, as the story unfolds, it becomes clear that his definition of freedom is not an objective state but a deeply subjective ideal one he is willing to pursue at any cost. In Calvinist theology, freedom is not merely the ability to choose but the capacity to act according to one's true nature. For fallen humanity, this nature is corrupted by sin, meaning that what is perceived as "freedom" may in fact be bondage to self-centered desires (Institutes, II.2.7).

In this light, Eren himself can be seen as a *slave to freedom*, a paradoxical figure whose every action is dictated not by open choice but by the fragments of future events he has already glimpsed. Far from liberating him, these visions of the future function as chains that bind his will to a predetermined path. Each decisive act he takes is, in reality, the fulfillment of scenes already fixed in the flow of history. His so-called "freedom" is therefore illusory, shaped entirely by the inevitability of what he has foreseen.

This raises an interpretive possibility: Eren's fixation on freedom mirrors the human tendency to absolutize personal autonomy while remaining blind to the deeper structures of spiritual and moral captivity. His "freedom" is paradoxically inseparable from violence, vengeance, and domination; demonstrating that, without transformation, the will simply expresses its bondage in new forms. Theologically, this resonates with Calvin's insistence that apart from divine grace, human will is never truly free, but always bound whether to sin, to fear, or to the illusions one calls "freedom."

### **3. Providence and the Paths of History**

In *Attack on Titan*, the Paths is a metaphysical network connecting all Eldians across time; it functions as a narrative device that ensures the continuity of history. This concept bears striking similarities to Calvin's doctrine of providence, wherein all events are encompassed within God's eternal plan, not by arbitrary chance but through purposeful ordination (Institutes, I.16.9). The Paths eliminate the possibility of true randomness, reflecting a cosmos in which every outcome has a place within an unbroken causal sequence.

Calvinist theology affirms that divine providence is not merely passive foreknowledge but active governance. Similarly, the Founding Titan's influence over the Paths does not merely *observe* history; it participates in its shaping. Yet, in Eren's case, this shaping is not boundless; it is confined within the contours of what has already been decreed, echoing Calvin's assertion that God's will is both the cause and the boundary of all events.

Theologically, this aligns with the Reformed view that God ordains both the ends and the means. In the Paths, the "threads" of causality are not loose strands waiting for someone to decide their pattern; they are intricately woven into a predetermined tapestry. Eren's interventions, whether large-scale like initiating the Rumbling or intimate like influencing key moments in the past, serve not to alter the grand design but to fulfill it. This makes the Paths a vivid metaphor for providence: a network where every action is significant, yet every significance is already embedded in the whole.

This imagery also resonates with biblical motifs such as the "Book of Life" (Revelation 13:8), in which the names and destinies of individuals are inscribed from before the foundation of the world. Just as the Paths connect every Eldian to the same timeless flow, divine providence unites every moment of history under a single, sovereign narrative. Eren's tragedy lies in his inability or unwillingness to rest in this reality. Instead of embracing the comfort that such an ordered cosmos might offer, he experiences it as a prison, thus reinforcing the central tension between the yearning for absolute autonomy and the inescapable rule of providence.

### **4. Responsibility Within Determinism**

One of the most morally charged aspects of Eren's story is the fact that his predetermined role does not absolve him of the consequences of his actions. In Calvinist thought, divine predestination does not negate human responsibility. As Calvin writes, "We are not coerced by God's will, but rather act willingly according to our nature" (*Institutes*, I.17.2). This is rooted in the belief that human will, though shaped and encompassed by divine decree, still operates voluntarily within its nature making individuals accountable for their choices.

This tension is sharply visible in Eren's decision to initiate the Rumbling. While he claims inevitability as a justification insisting that his vision of the future left no alternative, the narrative refuses to portray him as a mere passive instrument. Instead, Eren is depicted as fully aware of the catastrophic human cost of his actions, and he proceeds with a deliberateness that signals genuine volition. His comrades, especially Armin and Mikasa, continue to hold him morally accountable, underscoring that determinism within the *Attack on Titan* universe does not dissolve the bonds of ethical responsibility.

From a theological perspective, this dynamic parallels the Reformed assertion that God's sovereignty works through, not against, human will. The Apostle Peter's sermon in Acts 2:23 illustrates this dual reality; Christ's crucifixion occurred "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God," yet those who carried it out are still charged with guilt. Similarly, Eren's role in the Rumbling can be seen as the ordained path within the "Paths" network, but his embrace of that role without seeking alternative forms of resolution; renders him morally guilty.

Philosophically, this also engages with compatibilism: the idea that determinism and moral responsibility are not mutually exclusive. Eren's choices, though constrained by the future he has already glimpsed, are still "his" in the sense that they arise from his own convictions, fears, and desires. The tragedy, then, is not that he had no choice, but that his nature shaped by trauma, vengeance, and an obsessive vision of freedom made this catastrophic choice inevitable. In both Calvinist theology and *Attack on Titan*, foreordination does not reduce moral agency; rather, it reveals the profound gravity of human decisions within the unalterable flow of providence.

## 5. The Illusion of Choice

Throughout *Attack on Titan*, Eren insists that he acts of his own volition, framing his decisions as expressions of personal agency. His rallying cry of “freedom” becomes both the core of his identity and the justification for his increasingly extreme actions. Yet, the very structure of the narrative reveals a profound determinism: Eren's awareness of future events through the Attack Titan's power leaves little room for genuine spontaneity. Every major decision he makes, from protecting Mikasa and Armin in his youth to initiating the Rumbling, unfolds in precise alignment with the visions he has already seen. In effect, his “choices” are less about exploring alternative paths and more about walking toward an already fixed endpoint.

From a Calvinist standpoint, this mirrors the doctrine that humans will operate within the bounds of divine sovereignty. Calvin affirms that while humans act voluntarily, their actions occur within the parameters of God's eternal decree (*Institutes*, I.16.8). The will is neither coerced nor absolutely autonomous; it is free in the sense of acting according to its nature, but that nature itself unfolds within the divine plan. In Eren's case, the deterministic force is not divine providence but the immutable structure of the “Paths,” a metaphysical timeline that binds every Eldian's past, present, and future into a single interconnected reality.

The dramatic irony is sharp: the louder Eren proclaims his freedom, the more the audience perceives the invisible hand of inevitability guiding his every step. This tension raises the theological and philosophical question of whether perceived autonomy is fundamentally illusory when set against the backdrop of an unchangeable cosmic order. The parallel to human experience in Calvinist thought is striking. People may feel they are making entirely self-determined choices, yet those decisions are always embedded within the wider narrative authored by God.

Philosophically, Eren's situation evokes the compatibilist position: freedom is not the power to act independently of all causes, but the capacity to act in accordance with one's internal desires and purposes even if those desires are themselves determined. In the same way, believers in Calvinist theology may act “freely” in their daily lives, yet every act is mysteriously woven into the predetermined tapestry of God's providence. Eren's tragedy lies in the fact that the very thing he most desires absolute freedom is, by the logic

of his universe, impossible to attain. His journey becomes a narrative demonstration of the age-old tension between the experience of free will and the reality of divine (or metaphysical) determinism.

## **6. Sacrificial Themes in Eren's End**

Eren's final actions culminating in his death and the cessation of the Titan powers are framed within the series as a self-imposed necessity. By deliberately making himself the ultimate antagonist, he forces humanity into a united front, channeling their fear and hatred toward him so that the rest of the world might survive. This framing invites viewers to interpret his death as the pinnacle of agency, the conscious laying down of one's life for the sake of others. In narrative terms, it carries the structural hallmarks of the "self-sacrifice" trope found in epic and mythological traditions.

However, theological reflection complicates this reading. Through a Calvinist and broader Christian lens, Eren's "sacrifice" diverges sharply from the paradigm of Christ's atoning work. Christ's death, as understood in Reformed theology, is the ultimate act of willing obedience to the Father, motivated by perfect love and untainted by sin (Philippians 2:8; *Institutes*, II.16.5). It is substitutionary in nature not merely achieving a pragmatic outcome, but fulfilling the divine plan of redemption through sinless obedience.

By contrast, Eren's self-offering is deeply entangled with moral ambiguity. His choice is driven not solely by love, but also by resentment, fatalism, and the conviction that no other course of action could avert annihilation. While it results in a form of deliverance ending the Titan curse and allowing humanity a chance to rebuild it is inseparable from the catastrophic violence of the Rumbling and the staggering loss of innocent life. In Calvin's framework, such a sacrifice, however noble in intention, remains marked by the corruption of human will unless sanctified by God's grace (*Institutes*, III.15.6).

This makes Eren's end a kind of tragic inversion of the gospel narrative: salvation emerges, but through a path stained by moral compromise and necessity rather than perfect freedom and love. It illustrates the theological paradox that fallen humanity can

imitate the *form* of redemptive patterns without embodying their true essence. The biblical archetype of sacrifice involves not only the act of giving one's life, but doing so in full alignment with divine holiness and without compulsion.

From a dramatic perspective, Eren's death resonates with what theologians might call a "shadow" of atonement, a faint, distorted echo of Christ's work. It achieves peace, but at the cost of moral purity. In this sense, the ending of *Attack on Titan* invites both admiration for the scope of Eren's resolve and sober recognition of the ethical gulf between human attempts at salvation and the perfect, grace-filled sacrifice central to Christian faith.

### **Conclusion**

Eren Yeager's journey in *Attack on Titan* offers a compelling case study for exploring theological reflections on free will, determinism, and moral responsibility. Through his obsessive pursuit of freedom ironically becoming a "slave to freedom". Eren exemplifies the paradox of human autonomy under an unyielding providential order. His actions, though framed as personal choices, unfold as inevitable fulfillments of a future he has already glimpsed, echoing the Calvinist conviction that humans will operate within the boundaries of divine decree.

The narrative's tension between the illusion of choice and the reality of predestination resonates deeply with John Calvin's theological anthropology, which asserts that true freedom is found not in the capacity to act apart from God's will, but in alignment with it. Eren's final sacrifice, while achieving a form of collective deliverance, ultimately lacks the voluntary purity that Christian theology associates with Christ's atonement revealing the limitations of human self-determination in the face of cosmic inevitability.

By engaging with this fictional narrative through the lens of Calvinist theology, this study illustrates how popular culture can serve as a valuable arena for theological inquiry. Rather than offering a definitive doctrinal statement or using *Attack on Titan* as a proof-text for Calvinism, this analysis demonstrates the potential of pop culture to provoke deeper reflection on enduring theological questions. Eren's tragic arc invites audiences to wrestle with the same tensions that theologians have debated for centuries: the

mystery of divine sovereignty, the bounds of human freedom, and the meaning of sacrifice in a world where destiny and desire are in constant conflict.

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