

## ROMANS 9

### ISRAEL'S ROLE AND SALVATION (9:1—11:36)

Some scholars in the past treated Rom 9–11 as a digression (or even an interpolation from another context), but few share that view today. Far from being a digression, these chapters pick up the issue of Israel addressed in 3:1–9 (from which Paul in a sense digressed to address the relationship between righteousness and the law). Paul has been addressing the relationship between Jew and Gentile in Christ throughout (1:16; 2:9–10, 13–14; 3:9, 29; 4:10–12), and now must deal with the biblical evidence concerning God's purposes in history concerning Israel and the covenant.

#### Israel Special and Beloved (9:1–5)

In 9:1–3 Paul shifts rhetorically from the height of celebration to the deepest lament. Once Paul has begun addressing God choosing people (8:29–30), he has reminded his audience that he has not left the Jewish-Gentile issue that has dominated his letter. If believers are adopted, promised glory (8:18, 21, 30), and have the law in their hearts (8:2), what shall one say about ethnic Israel, to whom such blessings were already promised (9:4–5)? If nothing can tear the objects of God's love from him (8:35–39), what has happened to Israel, who has occupied this position historically? Paul answers abundantly from Scripture—in fact, over 27 percent of explicit citations in extant Pauline letters appear in Rom 9–11.

Perhaps Paul's lament in 9:1–3 includes some hyperbole, or perhaps it reflects Paul's mood before his perilous journey to Jerusalem (15:31); he elsewhere speaks much of rejoicing (12:12, 15; 14:17; 15:13, 32; 16:19; Phil 1:18; 4:4). Paul's understanding of emotion allowed him to combine both elements (2 Cor 6:10).<sup>1</sup> What we can feel secure in saying is that Paul

1. Sorrow and tears could be used rhetorically to stir an audience (e.g., Cicero *Mil.*

deeply loved his people and sorrow for the resistance of most of them to his gospel deeply wounded him. Along with his passion for reaching Gentiles, in fact, his experience of his people's rejection of the one that he was absolutely convinced was their rightful deliverer informed his approach in this letter as a whole. In 9:3 Paul offers himself for Israel, like Moses of old<sup>2</sup> (and more than Elijah in Rom 11:2–3), and in so doing he incidentally exemplifies the sort of spirit of self-sacrifice he invites in 12:1.

In 9:4–5 Paul elaborates the special benefits God has provided Israel (finally following up on a theme he introduced only briefly with “first” in 3:2).<sup>3</sup> Several of these reflect benefits he has already associated with believers, including Gentile believers (whom he will soon show have been “grafted into” Israel's heritage, 11:17): adoption as children (8:15, 23), glory (8:18, 21, 30), and the law (8:2, 4). Although there is a sense in which these belong particularly to ethnic Israel (11:28; 15:8), all believers also lay claim to the patriarchs (4:16–18)<sup>4</sup> and promises (4:13–16), as Paul will soon show again (9:6–9). He will also show later that believers participate in spiritual service or worship (*latreia*, 12:1; cf. 15:16).<sup>5</sup> Finally and most importantly, the Messiah comes from Israel in a physical way (cf. also 1:3–4). Given the parallel to Paul's doxology in 1:25, “who is . . . God blessed forever” in 9:5 most likely applies to the Christ who is over all,

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38.105; idem *Cael.* 24.60; in letters, Cicero *Fam.* 14.3.1; 14.4.1; Pliny *Ep.* 5.21.6; 2 Cor 2:4; Phil 3:18); for *pathos* in Roman rhetorical appeals, see Kraftchick 2001: 52–56 (more generally, see Olbricht and Sumney 2001); for weeping with others, e.g., Cicero *Fam.* 14.3.1; 14.4.1. Some Stoics may have disapproved (Engberg-Pedersen 2000: 96–97; Arius Didymus *Epit.* 2.7.10, p. 56.6–16; 2.7.10a, p. 58.11–16; 2.7.10b, p. 58.26–27; 2.7.11e, p. 68.17–18), but in practice cf. Ps.-Heraclitus *Ep.* 5; Fitzgerald 1988: 199.

2. Exod 32:32 (with Schoeps 1961: 134, and many others); for the limits of such intercessors' effectiveness, cf. Jer 15:1; Ezek 14:14, 20. Roman Gentiles respected citizens who offered themselves for their people (Valerius Maximus 1.5.2; Plutarch *Cam.* 5.6), so they could understand the sentiment.

3. Paul's rhetorical sensitivity is clear in 9:4: making the list sound fuller by polysyndeton (explicit conjunctions), Paul also chooses nouns ending in *-thesia*, *-a*, *-ai*, *-thesia*, *-a*, *-ai* (Paul must break the pattern in 9:5 with two masculine nouns). The present tense verb reveals God's continuing activity with regard to ethnic Israel (Piper 1983: 8).

4. The phrase (also in 11:28; 15:8) applies especially to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (*Sipra Behuq.* pq. 8.269.2.5), although it need not be limited to them (cf. 1 Cor 10:1).

5. Paul nowhere else in Romans applies “covenants” to believers, but their sharing in the new covenant (explicit in 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6; Gal 3:17; 4:24) is implied in Rom 2:28–29; 7:6.

though Paul more often prefers the divine title “Lord” for him (10:9–13; 1 Cor 8:5–6; Phil 2:9–11 [with Isa 45:23]).<sup>6</sup>

By elsewhere applying most of these benefits to all believers, Paul is not denying the relationship of these benefits to Israel’s heritage. Rather, Gentiles who submit to Israel’s God-ordained king are grafted into the covenant, whereas Jews who do rebel against him are broken off. It is not the covenant that changed, but some members of Israel (as throughout Israel’s history) did not maintain their side of the covenant.<sup>7</sup> In the OT, Gentile adherents to the covenant were a smaller minority, but the obedient remnant of Israel could be either large (as in Joshua’s or David’s day) or small (as in Moses’s or Ahab’s day). That so many Gentiles would be welcomed (and without circumcision) might be a “mystery,” but it can be made known from Scripture precisely because Gentiles had always been welcome to join the covenant (16:25–26).

### God’s Choice Not Bound by Ethnicity (9:6–29)

The conjunction of God’s promises (9:4–5) with Israel’s tragic alienation (9:1–3) raises the issue of theodicy: has God’s promise failed (9:6)? Paul responds that God’s covenant is secure, but it does not apply automatically to all of Israel’s ethnic descendants (9:6).<sup>8</sup> He demonstrates this premise from unexpected yet undisputed historic examples: not all of Abraham’s children received the promise (9:7–9), nor did all of Isaac’s (9:10–13). (Ishmael was blessed, but not the primary line of descent; Esau received even more limited blessing.)<sup>9</sup> The echoes of the Greek text of 9:7 in 9:29

6. The matter is debated, but the title fits Pauline Christology of Jesus as divine, even though he usually prefers other wording (cf. e.g., comment on Rom 1:7). Those skeptical that it refers to Christ include Byrne, Dunn, Johnson, Käsemann, Stuhlmacher; those favoring a reference to Christ (currently the majority) include Origen; Cranfield; Cullmann 1959: 313; Fahy 1965; Jewett; Moo; Sanday and Headlam; Schlatter; see at length Harris 1992: 143–72.

7. Cf. Hays 1989: 96–97 (Israel remains Israel, rather than there being a “new Israel,” but Gentile believers are absorbed into it).

8. Paul could have also cited for this point judgment on the wilderness generation (as in 1 Cor 10:5–10); Deuteronomy’s blessings and curses, and so forth.

9. Later rabbis counted both Ishmael and Esau as chaff, but insisted that none of Jacob’s sons were (*Sipre Deut.* 312.1.1; 343.5.2; *Tg. Ps.-J.* on Gen 35:22; cf. *Jub.* 15:30). Esau appears particularly negatively in Jewish sources (e.g., Philo *Alleg. Interp.* 3.88; *T. Jud.* 9:2; *Pesiq. Rab Kah.* 3:1), and later sources use him as a cipher for Rome (probably 4 *Ezra* 6:7–10; pervasively in third century and later rabbinic; cf. Freedman 1995; Hadas-Label 1984).

make clear that Paul is using this argument to prepare for his case that only a “remnant” within Israel will be saved. Paul cites both Gen 25:23 and Mal 1:1–2 to support the notion that God’s favor for Jacob depended on his gracious calling and choice before Jacob performed works.<sup>10</sup> Thus, mere genetic descent is not what counts, but being divinely chosen (9:8);<sup>11</sup> Paul emphasizes the promise, which he has already associated with those who believe (Rom 4:16).

Because Scripture often associated God’s righteousness with his covenant faithfulness to Israel, the failure of some Israelites to believe could appear to some as a sign of God’s unrighteousness (9:14, essentially repackaging the objection in 3:3, 5). But the very question is misplaced, Paul shows, for God is right to do as he pleases, and what he pleases will always be what is right. Humanity merits punishment, but God shows mercy and compassion where he wills (9:15),<sup>12</sup> graciously saving some though he is obligated to save none (cf. 3:23). In the context of the passage that Paul cites in 9:15 (Exod 33:19, addressed to Moses), Israel has sinned and God plans to withdraw his presence. Because Moses found favor in God’s sight, however, his intercession for Israel (33:13–16; 34:9) proved efficacious—God revealed his character, which included compassion to the undeserving (33:17, 19) and his covenant love that exceeded his wrath (34:6–7).<sup>13</sup> (That the runner would not prevail by his own effort recalls biblical pictures of how judgment or death would overtake all, Eccl 9:11; Jer 46:6; Amos 2:14–15.)

10. Both of these passages in context emphasize God’s grace in treating Israel as special. In the context in Gen 25 the birth of both children was a gift (v. 21); in Malachi, God shows Israel how special they are, versus Edom that has opposed them. Paul approaches the texts not to emphasize Israel’s specialness, however, but to emphasize something about God: he is free to show grace where he desires.

11. Cf. Gal 3:14–29; 4:23–28, where Paul is thinking of the inclusion of Gentiles (Hays 1989: 187–88). For discussion of predestination, see comment on 8:29–30.

12. Cf. similar expressions of God’s sovereignty in Tob 4:19; 13:2, 5; much later, *Gk. Apoc. Ezra* 2:17. The conjunction of issues of justice (9:14) and mercy (9:15) may recall the concern in 3:26 (on justice and mercy as competing divine attributes in later rabbinic, see e.g., Urbach 1979: 1:448–61).

13. Paul in 9:3 alluded to Moses’s intercession in Exod 32:32, because of which God spared Israel (comparing himself with Moses hence presumably his Jewish detractors with Pharaoh); the same context remains in view. Moses pleads for favor in God’s sight (33:13, 16—all the while asking it for Israel). God does grant Moses favor (33:17), answering his prayer to go with Israel (33:18); he *does* show mercy in response to Moses’s request.

Yet not only does God show mercy sovereignly, but he also hardens sovereignly (Rom 9:17–18). In Exod 9:16<sup>14</sup> God had shown mercy in not destroying Egypt (cf. Exod 9:15) so he could continue to reveal his power in them and make his name known. Paul adapts the wording; God had not only spared Pharaoh, but “raised him up,” which could develop the idea beyond preservation (it was common LXX language for awakening), or could refer to God even stirring Pharaoh to his mad course (cf. the LXX verb in Jer 6:22; 50:41; 51:1; Hab 1:6). Paul reads this claim in the larger context of Exodus’s theology of God’s sovereignty: God also hardens Pharaoh to show his glory.

We should keep in mind that God hardening people is not a pervasive Pauline theme (though it does appear), hence it should be balanced with other aspects of his theology and of Scripture. His very example of God judging a stubborn Pharaoh could also be used, for example, to teach God’s concern that Gentiles know of him: God kept hardening Pharaoh’s heart so God’s judgments would notify Egypt that he was the Lord (Exod 7:5, 17; 14:4, 18), just as he wanted to show Israel (Exod 6:7; 10:2; 16:6, 12). Likewise, Paul believes that God gave the world over to its own moral depravity (Rom 1:24, 26, 28), and could have inferred an analogous lesson from Exodus. It is said that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exod 8:15, 32; 9:34; 1 Sam 6:6) as well as that God hardened it (Exod 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8; predicted in 4:21; 7:3; 14:4; cf. the passive “was hardened” in 7:13, 22; 8:19; 9:7, 35).<sup>15</sup> Apparently God chose this Pharaoh not so that an honorable man would become stubborn but so that God would judge a wicked leader, revealing God’s power. Certainly Paul shares the text’s interest in the honor of God’s name throughout the world (Rom 1:5; 2:24).

But Paul emphasizes the appropriate side of “hardening” theology to prepare for a shocking point: the God who shows mercy as he wills is also the God who can harden as he wills, and he has hardened his own people. As God hardened the Gentile Pharaoh to deliver Israel and reveal his

14. God now speaks to Pharaoh (Rom 9:17) as he had to Moses (9:15), perhaps continuing in some sense earlier contrasts between God’s servant and a “Gentile” (between Ishmael and Isaac, Esau and Jacob). For “Scripture” personified speaking, or identified with God’s voice, see e.g., Matt 19:5; *m. Sot.* 9:6; *t. Sot.* 12:2; *Mek. Shir.* 6; 1QM 11.5–6; probable reading of 4Q158 f1 2.11–13.

15. As noted also in Augustine *Exp. prop. Rom.* 62 (though he later changed; Reasoner 2005: 106).

name among the nations, so God has hardened Israel to bring a chance for salvation among the Gentiles (11:7, 25; cf. 2 Cor 3:14).

Jewish people rightly affirmed God's sovereignty alongside his election of Israel. Yet Paul argues that, with respect to individual *salvation*, God being sovereign precludes him from being bound to choose on the basis of ethnicity. He can save Gentiles as well as Jews, and on the terms he chooses. The interlocutor who thinks this unjust (9:14; cf. 3:3) now objects that for God to be *this* sovereign would abnegate human responsibility (9:19), a moral argument parallel to 3:7. Paul will turn to Jewish responsibility in 9:32, but first he disposes of the propriety of this objection altogether. He again responds from Israel's Scripture, in Isa 45:9 (cf. Isa 29:16): will the pot complain to the potter about how it has been made? The context in Isaiah 45 is Israel's salvation, through God's sovereign purposes in international history (an idea Paul will address in ch. 11); the context in the similar passage in Isaiah 29 is the justness of God's judgment against Israel's intransigence (Isa 29:1–16).<sup>16</sup>

In 9:22–24, however, it is clear that Paul's emphasis on God's sovereignty continues to focus especially on grace. Paul has already indicated the purpose for which God was forming vessels for glory: conformity with his Son's image (8:29). God makes vessels for honor, which is his interest, but endures those that are objects of his wrath for the sake of the others (9:22–23).<sup>17</sup> In the context of the text from Exod 9:16 just cited, God endured the objects destined for wrath and destruction, like Pharaoh, so that he could "make his power known" (9:22) and lavish his glory on his people (9:23), just as he demonstrated his "power" in Pharaoh to make known his name (related to his glory) in 9:17 (quoting Exod 9:16). But as that text had declared that he would make known his power and name "throughout the earth," Paul can infer that God cares about Gentiles as well as Jews (9:24). Just as the new exodus of salvation evokes the pattern

16. The potter's right over the clay in Rom 9:21 might also evoke Jer 18:3–6 (Hays 1989: 65–66); it would not be unusual for Paul to have linked the common images. For creatures of "clay" acknowledging God's sovereignty, see 1QS 11.21–22; 1QH 1.21; 3.23–24; 12.24–25; 13.14–15; 18.11–12, 24–27; Sir 33:12–13; cf. analogous rhetorical questions regarding his sovereignty, Wis 12:12; *L.A.B.* 53:13.

17. Fashioning clay into both vessels for clean uses and those for unclean uses (per-chamber pots and the like) recalls Wis 15:7, although it lacks contextual resonances (the context involves making idols; cf. 2 Tim 2:20–21). The world existed so the righteous could exist (4 *Ezra* 6:59; 7:11; 9:13; 2 *Bar.* 15:7; 21:24; *Sipre Deut.* 47.3.1–2); the wicked were created for destruction (4Q418 f69 ii.6).

of how God saved Israel in the first exodus (see comment on 8:14–17), so is the pattern in this passage. In 9:22–23 the wrath against the Gentile Pharaoh prefigures the eschatological wrath (cf. 2:5; 5:9), but the mercy (evoking 9:16–18 and especially the text in 9:15) involves salvation, for both Gentiles and ultimately Israel (11:30–32; 15:9).

Paul must show from Scripture that God did not use an ethnic criterion that guaranteed salvation for Jews and damnation for Gentiles. As Paul backs up his claim in 9:24 with Scripture in 9:25–26, he again shocks those familiar with traditional readings of the text by inverting those readings. He quotes Hos 2:23 and then 1:10, both of which contextually reverse the judgment of Hos 1:9.<sup>18</sup> In context, God had rejected his people and annulled the covenant (Hos 1:9, presumably involving the coming exile), but would restore them one day (1:10–11; 2:1, 23), a restoration the ultimate fulfillment of which appeared future in Paul's day. Perhaps Paul uses this text to justify the Jewish remnant in 9:24, but he would probably also seek to justify the more controversial incorporation of Gentiles on which that verse climaxes. How could Paul (who knows the context well enough to cite two key restoration texts from it) apply to Gentiles a text about Israel's restoration?<sup>19</sup> Perhaps he reasons that if God could temporarily reject his people, he might meanwhile welcome members of other peoples (cf. 10:19); such an inference would fit Paul's larger understanding of God's plan, articulated in similar terms (cf. 11:30–32). Certainly Paul will go on to speak of a current remnant (9:27–28) and a future restoration of the Jewish people as a whole to God (11:26–27). Perhaps most importantly, Paul reasons that if Israel, rejected from being God's people, could again become God's people, God could also welcome others who were not his people.

After quoting Hosea, Paul in Rom 9:27–28 quotes Isa 10:22–23. Paul can link this text with the one just cited (Hos 1:10) because both mention Israel being “like the sand of the sea.” (Linking texts based on a common key term or phrase was a common Jewish interpretive technique, and Paul goes so far as to blend the two texts, importing “sons of Israel”

18. Paul adapts the wording, inserting *kaleō* (“call,” 9:24–26; cf. 8:30; 9:12) from his quotation in Rom 9:7 (Hays 1989: 66).

19. Some early Christian interpreters thought Hosea referred to Gentiles (John Chrysostom *Hom. Rom.* 16; Augustine *Exp. prop. Rom.* 65); others that it had been transferred to Gentiles (Theodoret *Interp. Rom.* on 9:25; Bray 1998: 266–67). Hays 1989: 67, argues that Paul simply inverts the text's plain meaning (as he offers other inversions in Rom 9).

from Hos 1:10 into Isa 10:22 to bridge the connection.)<sup>20</sup> Clearly the text from Isaiah refers to God judging Israel so that only a remnant would be delivered (by depending on God, Isa 10:20). Elaborating further Isaiah's remnant theology in Rom 9:29, Paul cites Isa 1:9, which speaks of Israel having few survivors—and being treated nearly as harshly as wicked Gentiles!<sup>21</sup> (In context Isaiah went on to compare them precisely with such wicked Gentiles, in 1:10, and to point out that their religion was empty before him because devoid of justice, 1:11–23.) Paul applies the same principle of God's activity to the present: when Israel was disobedient, only a remnant would be delivered. Often in the OT, Israel as a whole was in apostasy, with only a remnant saved; for Paul, that made sense of Israel as a whole not being saved in his generation (though a future generation of Israel would be, 11:26–27).

### Two Approaches to the Law and Righteousness (9:30—10:10)

In 9:30—10:10 Paul presents two approaches to the law and righteousness, but he believes that only one (the way of faith) can genuinely save sinful people of flesh. Based on the foregoing scriptural argument (that God does not save based on membership in ethnic Israel), Paul in 9:30–33 addresses the reason for Israel's failure to be saved. He has argued that Gentiles could be saved and Jews could be unsaved (9:30–31)—one cannot predict salvation based on ethnicity. How did God make Gentiles right? By their dependence on his mercy, i.e., by their faith, rather than by their seeking to become right (9:30). By contrast, Israel, seeking righteousness through the law, could not fulfill the law (9:31) because they approached the law the wrong way, as a standard rather than an invitation to depend on God's kindness (9:32). If Jewish people ever prided themselves in keeping the law, this would be especially true in a context like this one that notes their view of “ungodly” Gentiles (who neither received the law

20. Jews and Gentiles alike commonly adjusted the wording of texts to fit the new contexts where they were being quoted. Actually conflating texts could stem from oral memory or more likely in this case part of Paul's rhetorical strategy; on conflation in antiquity, see Stanley 1992: 290–91, 322, 337, 342, 349. The rhetorical *suntelōn* and *sunteḿnōn* already appeared in the Greek version of Isaiah.

21. Disobedient Israel is compared with Sodom in the prophets (e.g., Isa 3:9; Jer 23:14; Ezek 16:46–56); early Jewish sources continued to use it as an example of immorality (*Jub.* 36:10; 3 *Macc* 2:5; *t. Sanh.* 13:8; *Shab.* 7:23; *Sipra Behuq.* par. 2.264.1.3; *Sipre Deut.* 43.3.5).



nor sought to obey it). Paul has already indicated that the *right* way to use the law is to inspire trust in God rather than confidence in one's own keeping of its precepts (3:27, 31; cf. 8:2), and will develop this argument further in 10:5–10.

In 9:32–33 Paul notes that Scripture had already indicated Israel's failure (he also notes this in 10:16): many in Zion would stumble, except those who *trusted* in the rock of their salvation. Paul here conflates two related Isaiah texts: 8:14 (a stumbling stone) and 28:16 (“I lay in Zion a . . . stone . . . and whoever trusts in it will not be put to shame”).<sup>22</sup> In the context of Isa 8:14, it is God whom Israel should fear (Isa 8:13); God himself would become their sanctuary, but Israel would stumble over this rock instead of welcoming it (8:14–15). In the next passage, God decrees judgment on Israel (28:1–29), but lays in Zion a precious cornerstone, so that whoever trusted in it would not be ashamed (28:16)—i.e., would be kept through the judgment. For Paul, believers would not be “ashamed” or “disappointed” regarding their eschatological hope of salvation (Rom 5:5; 10:11). The saved remnant would be saved through *faith*.<sup>23</sup> For Paul, this faith in the cornerstone must be christocentric faith.<sup>24</sup>

22. On conflation in antiquity, see Stanley 1992, cited above.

23. Part of Israel's problem may be lack of acceptance of God's sovereignty in terms of recognizing the gift as unmerited (9:15–21), although many of Paul's contemporaries would have contested this diagnosis.

24. The rock in Isa 8:14–15 is divine; Paul applies to Jesus the image of a divine rock in 1 Cor 10:4; see comment in Keener 2005b: 85. Jesus had described himself as a cornerstone (Mark 12:10), using Ps 118:22; some early Christians linked that text with those that Paul cites here (1 Pet 2:6–8; see discussion in Longenecker 1970: 50–53).