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The Freedom of God and the Hope of Israel: Theological Interpretation of Romans 9

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Introduction

Romans 9, of course, concerns Israel, yet it has repeatedly been a battleground in theological debate over soteriology. The focus has been on issues of election, human freedom and divine sovereignty. Romans 9 has provided foundational material for the theologies of Augustine, Luther and Calvin. Augustine saw it as the heart of the whole letter.¹ Calvin called it “that memorable passage from Paul which alone ought easily to compose all controversy” —concerning the doctrine of election — “among sober and compliant children of God.”² This paper outlines some of the historical contours of the debate, and asks whether the passage can bear the weight that has been thrust upon it. A proper contextual reading needs to pay attention to the situation of the Roman believers, and to Paul’s concern for the status and fate of Israel, particularly as expressed in Romans chapters nine through eleven. The typical verse-by-verse commentary method has the danger of viewing texts in isolation, and that failing is certainly evident in treatments of Romans 9. Future theological interpretation of the passage should first be able to show how it addresses the Roman believers’ concern over the fate of Israel, and how it fits into its larger context.

Historical Overview

The following brief historical overview looks at some of the most significant commentators. Limitations of space prevent a more comprehensive survey.

¹See Peter Gorday, *Principles of Patristic Exegesis: Romans 9-11 in Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity, vol. 4 (New York: Edward Mellen Press, 1983), 176.

²Jean Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. J.K.S. Reid (London: J. Clarke, 1961), 76.

Origen

Origen shows in his commentary on Romans³ that he is aware of the problem that Paul is dealing with, which is that the word of God has appeared to fail with regard to Israel. Israel, he says, “received its name by seeing God” (*Romans* 7.14.2, recalling Gen 32:30) and those who have not “seen” — that is, had faith in the Son — “cannot be called Israel” (7.15.2). The people of Israel “have been repudiated through unbelief.” Once Origen moves past 9:6, however, his focus largely comes off Israel and onto other philosophical or theological issues. Responding to the deterministic approach of the Gnostics,⁴ he places much of vv. 14-19 in the mouth of an interlocutor. Origen defends God’s freedom to judge, God’s foreknowledge as the basis of predestination, and the free will of human beings: “That we may be good or evil depends on our will; but that the evil man should be appointed for punishments of some sort and the good man for glory of some sort depends on the will of God” (7.16.7). Concerning vv. 19-24, the impudent person should not answer back to God, but the humble servant of the Lord can certainly enquire into the judgments of God, by diligently searching the scriptures (7.17.2-4). The choice of Jacob over Esau can be explained by God’s seeing the purity of Jacob’s soul by comparison to that of Esau.⁵

Origen’s approach shows two methodological features that reoccur in later scholarship. First, he brings in other passages from outside Romans which help him explain the text, showing no preference for explaining Romans from Romans. Second, the rather atomistic commentary format means that the meaning of larger portions of text is rarely considered, at least directly. Thus the Israel question tends to slide from view.

Chrysostom

Chrysostom’s treatment by contrast maintains an interest in the question of Israel’s destiny. Israel is responsible for its own condition; they are “of the works of the law,” while the Gentiles are justified because “they are of faith.”⁶ God knows in advance who “is worthy of being saved,”⁷ and freely adds grace to them. When Paul says that “it is not of the one who wills, not of the one who runs” (Rom 9:16), “he does not deprive us of free-will,” because grace is required. “It is binding on us to will, and also to run; but not to trust in our own labors, but in the love of God.”⁸ Like Origen, Chrysostom defends both the justice of God, and human free will. Paul could not be im-

³Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 6-10*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, The Fathers of the Church, vol. 104 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2002).

⁴Mark Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle: A History of Interpretation*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 96.

⁵*Romans* 7.17.7. Drawing on imagery from 2 Tim 2:20-22 Origen suggests that Jacob’s soul had cleansed itself.

⁶Chrysostom, *Romans*, 465.

⁷*Ibid.*, 466.

⁸*Ibid.*, 469.

plying that free-will is under necessity, because humans would then be “free from all responsibility,” and this would be inconsistent with Paul’s emphasis elsewhere on free choice.⁹

Augustine and Pelagius

A significant debate about free will in the church took place between Augustine of Hippo and the British monk Pelagius, in the early fifth century. An ascetic,¹⁰ Pelagius was disturbed by what he considered lax morality in the Roman church, and was especially dismayed by the moral passivity he saw in Augustine’s prayer, in his *Confessions* 10.40; “Give what you command, and command what you will.”¹¹ It was Pelagius’ pastoral letter to the young Roman woman Demetria which first excited the wrath of Augustine.¹² Pelagius was concerned lest Demetria imbibe what he thought was false teaching, that if God wanted us to do good he should not have made us with the potential for evil, and so we have every excuse for evil (*Ad Demetria*, 3.1).¹³ He quotes Rom 9:20; “Why have you made me thus?” The teaching he opposes is, he says, a case of the pot complaining to the potter. Pelagius says that, “God wished to bestow on the rational creature the gift of doing good of his own free will and the capacity to exercise free choice, by implanting in man the possibility of choosing either alternative” (3.2). Thus Pelagius uses Romans 9 to justify absolute free will. Since virtue could even be seen in pagan philosophers, how much more able are Christians to do good, having Christ’s instruction and the aid of divine grace (3.3).

In his *Commentary on Romans* Pelagius explains election as due to foreknowledge of faith. On the choice of Jacob over Esau, he states: “He has now chosen those whom he foreknew would believe from among the Gentiles, and has rejected those whom he foreknew would be unbelieving out of Israel.”¹⁴ The whole passage concerns whether God chooses those who believe, or those who work for salvation through the law. Pelagius has a problem with verses 14-19, which appear to deny the importance of human will or exertion. His solution, like Origen, is to put much of these verses in the mouths of Paul’s opponents, with Paul’s answer starting in verse 20. By this ingenuity he changes the apparent meaning to its exact opposite, so that it

⁹Ibid., 468.

¹⁰John Ferguson, *Pelagius: A Historical and Theological Study* (Cambridge: W. Heffer, 1956), 46.

¹¹Augustine, *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. J.K. Ryan (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), 255.

¹²Demetria, a member of Roman nobility, at the age of fourteen devoted herself to a life of chastity and good works. This caused a great stir, and much rejoicing in the church. Pelagius was among several who lent their advice to the new religious celebrity.

¹³Pelagius, *To Demetria*, in B. R. Rees, ed., *The Letters of Pelagius and his Followers* (Rochester, N.Y.: Boydell Press, 1991), 38-39.

¹⁴Pelagius, *Pelagius’s Commentary on St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans: Translated with Introduction and Notes*, trans. Theodore De Bruyn, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 116.

really does depend on the one who wills and runs, though also on the Lord.¹⁵ Justice requires that free will be absolute, so that every decision between good and evil could be fairly judged and rewarded. Grace, to Pelagius, was not an internal operation of the Spirit, but came through teaching, by the example of Christ.

In *Propositions from the Book of Romans* Augustine takes the same position as Pelagius on election and foreknowledge: "Therefore God ... chooses precisely him whom he foreknew would believe in him" (*Prop.* 60).¹⁶ God elects faith not works (*Prop.* 62). The hardening of Pharaoh (Rom 9:17) was because of his existing impiety, to lead him into his just punishment (*Prop.* 62). Thus Augustine upholds free will, but not an independently able will. Good works can only be done through the gift of the Holy Spirit, which is given to those who believe. Faith is not considered either a good work, or a gift (*Prop.* 44).¹⁷

Augustine's first main opponents were the Manichaeans.¹⁸ They viewed good and evil as eternally opposed principles in the universe, believing in reincarnation, asceticism, and the eternal predestination of an elect few.¹⁹ Augustine had been a Manichaean before going through neo-Platonism to Christianity, from which perspective he opposed Manichaean dualism, teaching that God was completely good, and that evil was not eternal but had its origin in the human will.²⁰

Within two years after writing the *Propositions* Augustine had substantially modified his position to a rigorous predestinarianism, though from his perspective he had barely changed at all.²¹ It is possible that in Augustine's later reaction to Pelagius he reverted to elements of the Manichaean principles he had previously opposed, or of the neo-Platonism he had never fully left, but the process had already begun, with the writing of *To Simplician - On Various Questions (De diversis questionibus ad Simplicianum)* in AD 396. Responding to a question about the interpretation of Romans 9:10-29, he starts by claiming to be guided by his understanding of the purpose of the whole epistle, namely that "no man should glory in meritorious works", that "works do not precede grace but follow from it" (1.2.1-11). But he cites no passage from Romans to support this, though he does mention 1 Corinthi-

¹⁵Ibid., 118.

¹⁶Paula Fredriksen Landes, ed., *Augustine on Romans: Propositions from the Epistle to the Romans, Unfinished Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Texts and Translations (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1982).

¹⁷Significantly also, he interprets Romans 7 as referring to Paul's previous life under the law, not as describing the struggles of a Christian. He was later to change, viewing Romans 7 as referring to the Christian life.

¹⁸Mani had mixed elements of Christianity, Zoroastrianism and Buddhism with Gnostic dualism.

¹⁹Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1967), 169.

²⁰F. W. Farrar and Robert Backhouse, *The Life of St Augustine* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993), 102.

²¹Ibid., xii.

ans 3:17 and John 3:5. Augustine then argues from Romans 9 that grace cannot be merited, even by foreknown faith, but that faith itself is a gift of God's irresistible grace. Unbelievers receive merited justice, while believers receive unmerited mercy, and therefore no one has any cause for accusing God of injustice. After a long meditation on why God chose Jacob over Esau, he concludes that the answer is unknowable, but we should not question God on his choice (1.2.22).

In the *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, written in AD 420, Augustine also treats Romans 9 with this new perspective. He still sees the chapter as teaching individual election, but gone is any mention at all of the foreknowledge of faith. Rather, all are lost in sin. Only a few will be saved by grace, to make up the numbers of the angels who fell (9.29), the small numbers making it obvious that they were saved by God's undeserved mercy.²² God could save more, but then the elect would not understand God's grace. In other words, the lost are damned for the sake of the elect, surely the opposite of the sentiment expressed by Paul in Rom 9:3.

Both Esau and Jacob (before birth) were "bound in the fetters of damnation originally forged by Adam" and "due the judgment of wrath," but God "loved Jacob in unmerited mercy, yet hated Esau with merited justice."²³ In this system those who are hardened and damned deserve it. Those who receive mercy do not merit it. This could seem unjust, and so the main thrust of Augustine's exposition of Romans 9 here is to deny this perception: "God forbid," he says, "that there should be unfairness in God."²⁴

Augustine for some time did not absolutely deny the existence of free will,²⁵ but insisted that the will must be "prepared by the Lord,"²⁶ and that the human will without grace is only free to do evil. True freedom is being enabled to do good. The will is not destroyed by grace, but is changed.²⁷ All human wills, whether good or bad, are subject to God's power, so that he does with them what he likes. These include the "vessels of wrath," which are "ready for destruction" (Rom 9:22).²⁸ Eventually though Augustine claimed, "I have tried hard to maintain the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God prevailed."²⁹ Grace became irresistible.³⁰

This was an innovation in the church, a profound break. The uniform

²²Ibid., 99.

²³Ibid., 98.

²⁴Ibid., 98.

²⁵"He has revealed through his sacred scriptures that there exists in man the free choice of the will." Augustine, *On Grace and Free Will*, 2.2.

²⁶A frequent Augustinian quote from a version of Proverbs 8:35.

²⁷*On Grace and Free Will*, 19.40.

²⁸*On Grace and Free Will*, 20.41.

²⁹Augustine. *Retractions* 2.1.1.

³⁰Thus in his exposition of Luke 13:34: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!" he interprets it to mean that despite her unwillingness, God did in fact gather children from Jerusalem. *Enchiridion*, 24.

testimony of the earlier Fathers was to significant human freedom.³¹ Tertullian comments: "I find then that man was by God constituted free, master of his own will and power; indicating the presence of God's image and likeness in him ... both the goodness and purpose of God are discovered in the gift to man of freedom in his will."³² Chrysostom likewise: "All is in God's power, but not so that our free-will is lost ... It depends therefore on us and on Him. We must first choose the good, and then he adds what belongs to him."³³

Augustine's exegesis is marked by careful attention to the details of the text. He remembers that Romans has an overall purpose and point.³⁴ Nevertheless, he displays, like Origen, an atomistic approach which tends to ignore the issue of Israel, the flow of thought in Romans 9-11, or the needs of the Roman church. He focuses instead on the philosophical questions which he sees in the text.³⁵ By comparison to modern commentators the ancient commentators are less inclined to privilege Romans, or even other Pauline letters in their interpretations of Romans, and more likely to mine resources found elsewhere in the canon in their explanations. We should not expect the church Fathers to play by modern rules, but it is important to understand their approach and its limitations.

Luther and Erasmus

One of the most notable of the many arguments over free will happened between Erasmus and Luther.³⁶ When Erasmus addresses Romans 9 his focus is on the hardening of Pharaoh's heart.³⁷ He quotes Origen to the effect that when people are given an opportunity to repent and do so, they

³¹Irenaeus says: "This expression, 'How often I would have gathered thy children together, and thou wouldst not,' set forth the ancient law of human liberty, because God made man free from the beginning, possessing his own soul to obey the behests of God voluntarily, and not by the compulsion of God. For there is no coercion with God ... God is possessed of free will in whose likeness man was created." Irenaeus, *Adv. Her.* 4.37.1-4.

³²Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, Book 2.5.

³³John Chrysostom, *On Hebrews*, Homily 12.

³⁴"The Letter of Paul to the Romans, in so far as one can understand its literal content, poses a question like this: whether the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ came to Jews alone because of their merits through the works of the law, or whether the justification of faith that is in Christ Jesus came to all nations, without any preceding merits for works. In this last instance, people would believe not because they were just, but justified through belief; they would then begin to live justly. This then is what the apostle intended to teach: that the grace of the Gospel of Lord Jesus Christ came to all people. He thereby shows why one calls this 'grace,' for it was given freely, and not as a repayment of a debt of righteousness." Landes, *Augustine on Romans*, 53.

³⁵Paul's compassion for his Jewish kinsmen evoked very little comment from Augustine. He passed at once to 9.6ff where the question of election continues the theme of chapter 8" (Gorday, *Patristic Exegesis*, 168).

³⁶It is important to note that Erasmus was reacting to Luther's assertion that literally everything, good or evil, happens by absolute necessity, whereas Luther's main concern was in the things concerning salvation. Erasmus reacted to Luther's *Assertio* with a *Diatribes or Discourse on the Freedom of the Will*. Luther replied with *On the Bondage of the Will*.

³⁷Erasmus, "On the Freedom of the Will," in E. Gordon Rupp, ed., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1969), 64-74.

receive mercy, but if they refuse, their hearts are hardened. The patience of God in delaying punishment for sin gives some time to repent, but others are merely confirmed in their obstinacy against God. Thus he is saying that God hardens and has mercy by the very means of delaying judgment, depending on the response of the person involved. God could not have made Pharaoh wicked, since he made all things good. Rather, God raised him up that it might be seen that human striving against God's will is futile. God's government of the wicked turns their existing sinfulness to the benefit of the godly.³⁸ Erasmus also mentions Romans 9:16, "So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy." His explanation is that no one can do the good they intend without the aid of the free favor of God.³⁹

Erasmus then worries over Rom 9:19, "Who can resist his will," as to whether divine foreknowledge makes something necessary. He does not allow that evil could be caused by God, yet cannot see that foreknowledge could be contingent. He ends by limply saying that enough had been said about the verse.⁴⁰ He has an easier time with Jacob and Esau. The fact that God chose the older to serve the younger says nothing about eternal salvation. God's hatred for Esau was not malice, but his judgment on Edom as a nation. In the same way God's love for Jacob referred to the nation. God's choice of Israel did not grant automatic rights to grace, neither did it take away the free will of Jewish people.⁴¹ Erasmus also deals with 9:21: "Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?" He interprets it with reference to Is 45:9 and Jer 18:6, which picture Israel as clay pots in the hand of the potter, objecting to God's judgment. Erasmus says that the issue is not whether free choice is excluded, but whether God is righteous in excluding unbelieving Jews from grace.⁴² He resists an interpretation of the pottery metaphor which makes people inert lumps of clay, without a will.⁴³

Luther, drawing on Augustine, argues that the will is not free, for a number of reasons. First, because all people are bound in slavery to sin, the sinner is only free to sin. "Man without grace can will nothing but evil."⁴⁴ Second, Luther argues that free will is the possession of God alone. God acts in whatever way he pleases;⁴⁵ but attribution of such freedom to humanity deifies them. Third, Luther argues that God has both a revealed will and a

³⁸Ibid., 66.

³⁹Ibid., 68.

⁴⁰Ibid., 69.

⁴¹Ibid., 70.

⁴²Ibid., 71.

⁴³Here he quotes 2 Tim 2:20-21, in which people are referred to as vessels for noble or ignoble use, but urged to cleanse themselves. Their free will is not removed.

⁴⁴Martin Luther, "On the Bondage of the Will," in Rupp, ed., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, 333. He goes on to say: "The loftiest virtues of the best of men are in the flesh, that is to say, they are dead, hostile to God, not submissive to the law of God and not capable of submitting to it, and not pleasing to God." Ibid., 317.

⁴⁵Ibid., 141.

hidden will. The hidden will overrules both human will and God's own revealed will and word. "He has not bound himself by his word, but has kept himself over all things."⁴⁶ The secret will consists of that which he foreknows and predetermines, which will inevitably come to pass. The secret will must not be questioned, only adored. What God wills is right simply because he wills it.⁴⁷ God "does not will the death of a sinner, according to his word; but he wills it according to that inscrutable will of his."⁴⁸ Human will, says Luther, is therefore not free.⁴⁹ He does reluctantly allow for freedom in regard to the ordinary decisions of life, "the things below," but not in regard to salvation.

Luther finds support for his views in Romans 9. The passage refers to individual salvation, and argues against trusting either in the heritage of birth, or in good works to save.⁵⁰ He upholds original sin. Esau and Jacob had not done any evil before birth, yet they were evil. He notes Paul's concern for the Jews at the beginning and end of the chapter, but sees the central section as concerning the doctrine of predestination. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy," means, he says: "I will have mercy on whom I intended to have mercy, or whom I predestinated for mercy. ... On him I will have compassion and forgive his sin, in time and life, whom I forgave and pardoned from all eternity."⁵¹ Paul is confronting and condemning the very notion of free will.⁵² God's foreknowledge could not be consistent with freedom, because God's knowledge is immutable. Neither is God's power consistent with freedom. We do nothing of ourselves, but by God's omnipotence.⁵³

In the debate between Luther and Erasmus we see the beginnings of more recent discussion over whether Romans 9 should be interpreted in individual or corporate terms. Once again, however, discussion of Israel only takes place when it is directly mentioned in the text. The focus of discussion is, as may be expected, the pressing theological interests of the day.

Calvin and Arminius

Calvin and Arminius were not directly opposed in the same sense as Augustine and Pelagius, or Luther and Erasmus. Nevertheless they represent two main strands of reformed thinking on the issue at hand. Romans 9 is foundational to Calvin's philosophy. He sees the passage as an answer to Jews who were making the gospel dependent on their own works, in the same way that he felt the "papists" were currently doing.⁵⁴ Calvin is perfectly

⁴⁶Ibid., 201.

⁴⁷Ibid., 236.

⁴⁸Ibid., 201.

⁴⁹Ibid., 248.

⁵⁰Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. J.T. Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 121.

⁵¹Ibid., 122-3.

⁵²Luther, "Bondage of the Will," 241.

⁵³Ibid., 242-3.

⁵⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. H. Beveridge (Grand Rapids:

aware, of course of the Paul's concern with the fate of Israel. Israel has not generally embraced the gospel, but it cannot be that God's promise to Israel has proved false, or that Jesus was not the Messiah, but Calvin asks, "If this is the doctrine of the law and the prophets, how does it happen that the Jews so obstinately reject it?"⁵⁵ The reason, he said, that many Jews were excluded from salvation, was because of God's "special election." Like Luther, he viewed the hidden counsel of God as superior to and potentially even contradictory to God's revealed will: "The secret election of God overrules the outward calling."⁵⁶ Romans 9 really concerns the origin and cause of election, which, in the example of Jacob and Esau, are found in the secret counsel of God.⁵⁷ This election has to do with the eternal salvation of Jacob, not his earthly life, because Jacob's earthly life was full of trial and trouble. Romans 9 restricts grace to a few, chosen before creation in the secret will of God. The hardening of Pharaoh comes from the same secret will.⁵⁸ Like Augustine and Luther, he believed that whatever God wills is right because he wills it. Any inquiry into the reasons for God's predestining will is impious. Nothing is to be attributed to human will, and everything to God.

Arminius' position, outlined in the *Declaration of Sentiments*, was that free will, enabling humanity to choose true good, was endowed at creation; but even then was dependent on the assistance of divine grace.⁵⁹ After the fall the human will is in bondage, must be freed by regeneration and grace, and continues to be dependent on grace through the Holy Spirit. Grace, however, is not irresistible. The baseline of freedom is the ability of free will to resist grace.

Arminius shows interest in the setting of Romans 9. The scope of the chapter is the same as the scope of the letter: "That the Gospel, not the law, is the power of God to salvation, not to him that works, but to him that believes."⁶⁰ Jews were largely rejecting the gospel, and so it might seem that God's promise to them had failed, but Arminius insists that God has always chosen the children of promise over the children of the flesh. The children of the promise are those who seek righteousness through faith. The examples given in Romans 9 of Isaac, Jacob, Moses are types pointing to the gospel of Christ.⁶¹ Thus Paul is saying that God has chosen faith over works and

Eerdmans, 1989), 215.

⁵⁵John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 190.

⁵⁶John Calvin, *Romans*, 198. Calvin claims at this point that the "secret election" does not oppose the "outward calling."

⁵⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 216.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 226.

⁵⁹See Donald M. Lake, "Jacob Arminius' Contribution to a Theology of Grace," in Pinnock, Clark H., ed., *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1975), 235.

⁶⁰James Arminius, "Analysis of the Ninth Chapter of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans," in *The Works of James Arminius*, trans. William Nichols, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 487.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 494.

genetic descent, and we should not argue. It would be absurd for election to mercy or reprobation to take place before sin ever occurred.

Arminius emphasized that God had the right to do as he wished, but that not in every case was God's will done. God's foreknowledge still leaves room for contingency. Arminius denies that there are two wills in God, a hidden will which is never defied or revealed, and a revealed moral will which appears to be defied. Romans 9, in his view, says that no one can argue against God's chosen means of grace, not that only some individuals are able to enter by predestination. The ones God wills to harden are those who have persevered in sin, against God's invitation to repent.⁶² Hardening is a form of punishment. It is not the cause of divine wrath, but its result.⁶³

Karl Barth

Barth said that Paul wrote Romans 9 to deal with the problem of disobedience.⁶⁴ God's choice is not the problem, nor does God lack faithfulness to his word to Israel. Human autonomous freedom exists, but it is the problem of the world. True freedom is a gift from God, derived from God's own freedom. All are in some sense elect in Christ in eternity, and all rejected in time because of sin.⁶⁵ Barth reluctantly backs away from ultimate universalism, but insists that both election and rejection, for example of Jacob and Esau, or Moses and Pharaoh, are part of the same divine purpose of mercy in Christ.⁶⁶ Mercy is God's purpose even in judgment.⁶⁷

According to v. 22 the one will of God has indeed the form both of the manifestation of wrath and of the revelation of power. In showing mercy God is indeed also wrathful ... against the perversity that encounters him from the side of man.⁶⁸

Thus God's choices are not capricious but according to his eternal mercy, which is revealed through Jesus. God is free,⁶⁹ but he does not will or do anything arbitrarily, or according to a secret agenda which may be contrary to his open statements of intent, or contrary to his nature revealed in Jesus.

⁶²Ibid., 506.

⁶³Ibid., 516.

⁶⁴Karl Barth, *A Shorter Commentary on Romans* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), 112. He considers that all things necessary to the gospel have been stated in Chapters 1-8, and Romans 9 marks a distinct change, as opposed to Arminius, who felt that Romans 9 made the same point as the rest of the epistle.

⁶⁵Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Sixth ed., trans. E. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1950), 360.

⁶⁶Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 2.2, trans. G. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 219-221.

⁶⁷Barth, *Shorter Commentary on Romans*, 125.

⁶⁸Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 2.1, 225.

⁶⁹The phrase "the freedom of God", which I have used in the title of this paper, comes from Barth's second Romans commentary (Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E.C. Hoskyns [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933], 355).

When he hardened Pharaoh it was an act of mercy, so that God's name would be proclaimed in all the earth (Rom 9:17). Christ himself is the one who is elect, and all human freedom and destiny is wrapped up in him. Nevertheless Barth, like Luther and Calvin before him, insists that God finally determines every person's destiny in a secret judgment of grace or disfavor, that the final obedience or disobedience of a person is not in his or her hands.⁷⁰

A few conclusions can be drawn from this very limited historical survey. First, commentators have tended to interpret Romans 9 in line with their presuppositions about divine sovereignty and human free will, and the reigning theological debates of the day. There is no reason to suppose this trend will cease. Second, commentators have acknowledged the Israel question when Israel is directly mentioned in a verse, but tend otherwise to ignore it. The atomistic structure of commentaries, focusing on a verse or two at a time, has likely contributed to this neglect. Third, Augustine's determinist reading marks a significant break in the interpretative history of the passage. Fourth, non-Augustinian readings have tended to give more importance to wider contextual issues, perhaps, depending on one's point of view, because they have difficulty with some of the details of the text, or more positively, because a contextual reading tends to discount the narrow Augustinian interpretation.

Modern Debate

Modern debate has focused in two main areas: first, whether Paul is concerned with corporate or individual salvation, or both, and second, the way in which the passage relates to Israel.

Commentators with a more Arminian orientation argue that corporate election is in view in Romans 9, and that this accords with both the Old Testament notion of Israel's election, and with a first-century outlook which is communal rather than individualistic.⁷¹ God's decision is to elect in Christ those who believe.⁷² Calvinistic scholars insist that the passage deals with individual salvation and upholds unconditioned individual election.⁷³ Schreiner, for example, argues that Romans 9-11 is about Israel's salvation, not just its historical destiny; and that the corporate election of Israel described in Romans 9 must include particular individuals, because certain individuals are mentioned in chapter nine, individual salvation is discussed in Romans

⁷⁰Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. 1.1, trans. G. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975), 201.

⁷¹Brian J. Abasciano, "Corporate Election in Romans 9: A Reply to Thomas Schreiner," *JETS* 49/2 (2006): 351-71.

⁷²Grant R. Osborne, *Romans*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, 6 (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 2004), 251.

⁷³Thomas R. Schreiner, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election to Salvation? Some Exegetical and Theological Reflections," *JETS* 36/1 (1993): 25-40. John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993).

10, and because the election of a corporate body without any particular individuals would be a nullity or an absurdity.⁷⁴ The tendency is still to view the passage primarily in the light of the free will/determinism debate, or as simply an extension to the faith/works discussion of Romans 3 and 4, and to integrate the Israel question only tangentially, though to a greater degree than that evident in patristic and reformation writers.

One positive contribution of some new perspective scholars has been a more consistent attempt to explain Romans 9 in terms of an Israel narrative,⁷⁵ though this kind of interpretation has earlier antecedents.⁷⁶ James Dunn cautions against “generalizing too quickly from this passage.” “Paul,” he says, “is thinking solely in terms of salvation-history, of God’s purpose for Israel.”⁷⁷ Romans 9 is an in-house Jewish argument.⁷⁸ N.T. Wright sees the passage as “telling the story of Israel’s patriarchal foundation (vv. 6-13), then of the exodus (vv. 14-18), and then of God’s judgment that led to exile and, through it, to the fulfillment of God’s worldwide promise to Abraham (vv. 19-24).⁷⁹ This focus on Israel marks a healthy move in the history of interpretation of the passage, even though Dunn and Wright come to different conclusions. Without embracing Dunn’s and Wright’s conclusions, I shall attempt to follow this methodological lead, and even press it a little further.

Romans 9 in Context

Romans 9-11 should be seen not as an appendix or afterthought but as key to understanding the entire letter. The issue in these chapters is the problem of a lack of Jewish response to the gospel. This is the core of his response to a concern of vital interest to the Roman believers. The entire letter can be understood as a defense of the gospel in the light of its apparent failure to save Israel. Has the word of God failed (9:6)? Is the gospel something to be ashamed of (1:16)? Paul has to establish how the gospel is good news for Israel, as well as for Gentiles. If the gospel of Israel’s Messiah has not saved Israel, how can it be considered good news at all? If the Gentiles are joining in large numbers, but Jews are not, perhaps there is something fundamentally wrong with the message, and with the Gentile mission. Some, probably Jew-

⁷⁴Thomas R. Schreiner, “Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9: A Response to Brian Abasciano,” *JETS* 49/2 (2006); 373-86.

⁷⁵See Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle*, 8-9, who distinguishes to some degree between new perspective and narrative approaches.

⁷⁶See Willibald Beyschlag, *Die paulinische Theodicee, Römer IX-XI: Ein Beitrag zur biblische Theologie* (Halle, Strien, 1868), 22-26; Johannes Munck, *Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9-11* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967); Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 4, 28.

⁷⁷James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, vol. 38B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1988), 562. He refers specifically to Rom 9:14-23.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 555.

⁷⁹N. T. Wright, “Romans,” in *New Interpreter’s Bible Vol. 10*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 2002), 635.

ish believers, are weakening in faith (14:1).⁸⁰ If the promises of God to Israel are not fulfilled in the gospel, then perhaps a return to faithfulness to the law is necessary after all. Meanwhile, Gentile believers respond with arrogance (11:18).

Paul has to show how the gospel is the promised good news for Israel. In order to do this he has to establish what Israel's fundamental problem is. It is the same as the Gentiles' problem, which is the problem of sin. Romans 1-8 shows that sin is universal, subject to judgment, but cannot be solved by the law, and only through Christ and by the Spirit. The gospel alone means salvation, for Jews first, and also for Greeks (1:16). Though the problems of sin, the suffering of the church, and Israel's resistance to the gospel loom large, Romans is full of hope. The gospel does not break God's promises to Israel; rather, Christ came to confirm these promises (15:8), *and* so that the Gentiles too would glorify God (15:9). Romans 9-11 specifically addresses the problem of Israel's unbelief, starting with a lament (9:1-5), but ending with the promise that through the deliverer from Zion — that is to say, Jesus Christ — all Israel will be saved (11:26).

Four matters of relevance to the destiny of Israel have already been raised in chapters two to four, each of which are picked up again in chapter nine. The first is the assumption, which Paul challenges, that there ought to be a particular eschatological advantage for Israel. There are certainly privileges for Israel. They have the law (2:17) and were given the very words of God (3:2). In the end, however, these gifts are of no ultimate advantage, because all are under sin (3:9), and all who sin while under the law will be judged by that law (2:12). The second is the concern that, despite having heard the oracles of God, some Jews have not believed (3:3). The third is that as a result of Jewish unbelief in Christ, questions have been raised as to the truthfulness, faithfulness and justice of God and his word (3:3-8). Paul responds that God is just to judge Israel, on account of sin (3:5, 9, 20). The fourth is the scriptural record of the promise to Abraham (4:13-21, cf. Gen 12:1-3, 15:5-6, 17:5), which gives hope to Israel. Paul insists that the promise was to be received by faith and not the law, and Abraham is set forth as the key example of one who did not weaken in faith (4:19), but held on to the promises of God in hope.

These same concerns frame and inform the argument of Romans 9. In regard to Jewish privilege, Paul acknowledges the legitimate concern of the Roman believers for the fate of Israel. Not only are they his kinsmen, they have been granted a long list of privileges (9:3-5), including "the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of worship and the promises." Paul has already mentioned adoption (8:15, 23), glory (5:2) and the Abrahamic promise (4:14) as benefits of the gospel of Christ. He shares the anguish of the Roman Jewish believers that the ma-

⁸⁰See John W. Taylor, "Paul's Understanding of Faith" (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2004), 167-72.

majority of their brethren have not recognized Jesus as Messiah and Lord, and some are in active opposition (11:29). But he disagrees that Israel's privileges obligate God to treat Jews differently to Gentiles when it comes to faith in the gospel. In regard to Jewish unbelief in Jesus, Paul does not have to begin the chapter explicitly with this issue, suggesting that the Roman believers understand his lament (9:1-3). It is their concern too. He does, however, finish the chapter explaining that Israel did not pursue righteousness by faith, and instead "stumbled over the stumbling stone" (9:31-33), who is Christ (10:11-13); they did not believe in him. Concern to uphold the justice of God in his dealings with Israel dominates the central section of Romans 9 (9:14-18). With regard to the Abrahamic promise, it is this very notion by which Paul redefines Israel (9:6-13), and he insists that the gospel — the word of God — has not failed in regard to Israel. It does not lack credibility (9:6).⁸¹ Thus chapter nine reprises at greater length issues raised in chapters two to four.

It remains to illustrate in an exploratory manner how this approach might affect our reading of the chapter. Romans 9 can be divided into five sections. The first (9:1-5) establishes common ground between Paul and his readers. Israel has been truly blessed and privileged, but their current situation causes desperate concern. The list of blessings is not arbitrary; even the mention of "promises" points to a future hope.

The second section (9:6-13) explains how it is that the gospel has not failed with regard to Israel by reminding the Romans that Israel was always defined according to God's promise. Citing promises to Abraham and Isaac, he shows that not all the descendants of Abraham are the "seed" of Abraham, but the children of the promise (9:8). Paul has already established that the promise of righteousness is received by faith (4:14-16).⁸² In thus redefining Israel Paul is in company with other first-century Jewish writers such as those at Qumran, who understood their group to be the genuine faithful Israel. Like all of them, however, Paul also never forgot wider ethnic Israel, and anticipated their restoration. They may be presently hostile to the gospel, but they are still beloved for the sake of the patriarchs (11:28), and God will still show mercy to them (11:31).

The next section (9:14-18), in diatribe fashion, starts with an objection voiced as a rhetorical question: is there unrighteousness on God's part? Do Israel's privileges, promises and possession of the law create an obligation which God would be unrighteous to ignore? In typical Pauline fashion, the sharp negative answer *μὴ γένοιτο* is followed by an explanation. Paul has already said that God would not be unrighteous if he inflicted judgment upon Israel, because of unbelief (3:5). Here the focus is on the freedom of God in his granting of mercy, by way of a contrast between what God said to Moses

⁸¹For the phrase "the word of God" (ὁ λόγος τοῦ θεοῦ) as the gospel in Paul see 2 Cor 2:17, 4:2; Col 1:25; 1 Thess 2:13.

⁸²True Israel is the believing-in-Jesus Israel, the Israel of faith, and the church consists of believing-in-Jesus Israel, with the grafted-in addition of believing Gentiles (11:19-20).

about Israel, and what he said through Moses to Pharaoh. God's relationship to Israel, and therefore Israel's hope, is a matter of his choosing to act with mercy, not a matter of obligation. The quote from Exodus 33:19 comes after Moses' intercession for Israel, and as a response to Moses' request to see God's glory. It is God's free decision to forgive Israel, reflecting his character (cf. Ex 34:6-7). According to Rom 11:30-32, God's intention for wider ethnic Israel is still mercy. Even the word to Pharaoh (from Ex 9:16), and the assertion of God's freedom also to harden, needs to be read in the context of the Israel story in chapters 9-11, and the thrust of Romans' argument, which acknowledges Israel's unbelieving condition and undeserving state (3:1-20, 10:18-21), and yet provides hope for Israel's redemption (11:12, 15, 23-32). Israel's hardening, detailed in Rom 11:7-10, is not the end of the story. It is partial, not a final sentence. They have not believed, but they have not stumbled so as to fall (11:11). If they believe, they will be grafted back in again (11:23).

The fourth section (9:19-24), likewise in diatribe form, continues addressing the righteousness of God's treatment of Israel. Raising the issue which was brought up in 3:5-7, it asks whether God is right to judge Israel at all. The combined citation from Isaiah (29:66 and 45:9) addresses the insolence of presuming to quarrel with God. God is free to judge and save his people as he wishes, not according to Israel's notion of privilege, or its possession of the law. He is not obligated to treat every descendant of Abraham the same, even though they are like clay from the same lump. There is perhaps an echo here of the potter's house story from Jer 18:1-10, in which God asserts his freedom to judge the house of Israel, and any nation, as he sees fit. Paul has already asserted in 1:18, where the idolatrous Gentile nations are particularly in view, that God is even now revealing his wrath, at the same time as he is revealing his righteousness (1:17). In 3:25 we discover that God in his forbearance has passed over former sins so as to demonstrate his righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Likewise here in 9:22-24, the assumption is that Israel, far from deserving to be saved, deserves to be judged, a point made at length in chapters two and three. Unbelieving Israel, like the Gentiles, is the object of God's wrath and judgment. God has patiently endured Israel's sin, even though he is willing to reveal his wrath, in order to display his glory upon Jew and Gentile (9:24).⁸³

The three prophetic Scriptures (9:25-29) support this perspective. The first passage, a modified and combined citation of Hos 2:23 and 1:10 (LXX 2:25, 2:1), Paul understands to incorporate the Gentiles as well as Israel. The outcast, both Jew and Gentile, will be restored. The second and third quotes explicitly concern Israel's future. The prediction of a remnant affirms that God's judgment on Israel is righteous, so that only a remnant survives, but also points to a hopeful outcome. The remnant of Israel (cf. Is 10:22-23) is

⁸³ἐξ ἔθνῶν here means simply "of the Gentiles," as in Gal 2:15. Thus ἐξ Ἰουδαίων similarly means "of the Jews."

also the seed of Israel (cf. Is 1:9). Likewise in Rom 11:1-5 the existence of the present remnant of believing Jews, including Paul, is used as evidence that God has not abandoned Israel. Otherwise he would not have sent preachers of the gospel (Rom 10:16-18), and there would be no remnant at all. All this is intended to give hope for a greater salvation for wider ethnic Israel, who, Paul predicts, will respond to the gospel because of jealousy over the success of the gospel among the Gentiles (Rom 11:13).

The final section of the chapter (9:30-33) draws an initial conclusion that places the blame for the current plight of Israel on their failure as a whole to believe in Christ. The coming of Christ was intended to redefine Israel's relationship to the law, but they stumbled over him, pursuing the righteous law but not attaining the righteousness that Gentile believers found in Christ.

But chapter nine is not the end of the story. Chapter ten shows that Israel's promised salvation comes only through faith in Christ, and not through the law. They have heard the gospel, but so far, most of them have not believed. In chapter eleven, Paul reveals that God has a plan, using Gentile faith, to bring Israel to faith (11:23), and eventually bring about the salvation of "all Israel" (11:26), however that might be defined.

Conclusions

Christian scholarship has focused on Romans 9 as source material for the free will/determinism debate, going back at least as far as Origen's dispute with the Gnostics. With Augustine the ground of debate moved, and after him a determinist reading of Romans 9 became dominant, continuing in Protestant churches through the writings of Luther and Calvin. Both this reading, with its emphasis on individual election as the thrust of the chapter, and the opposing reading, with its emphasis on free will and corporate election, stem largely from an atomistic and philosophical approach to the passage which has paid too little attention to the relevance of Romans 9-11 to the Roman believers to whom Paul writes, and to the flow of argument in Romans. This is not to suggest that the concerns of the tradition are illegitimate, or that such questions should not be asked of the text. But it is necessary to question whether Romans 9 can bear the weight of the theology which has been thrust upon it, and to investigate what theological emphases would emerge from a more contextual and unified reading.

Based on an approach to Romans which sees the interpretation of the phenomenon of Jewish unbelief in Jesus, by comparison to the growth of the church among the Gentiles, as the key factor behind the writing of the letter, an initial investigation leads to a number of conclusions. First, the fate of Israel is the focus of the entirety of chapter nine, and each section of the chapter. Future theological interpretation, and any universalizing of the teaching of Romans 9, should take full account of this in detail. Second, the passage reaffirms both the credibility of the gospel, and the promise of salvation to

Israel through Israel's Messiah, though only as Israel believes in the gospel. The believing remnant is at once the redefined Israel of promise, and a beacon of hope for a wider ingathering of ethnic Israel through Christ.⁸⁴ Third, the passage affirms the freedom of God in his dealings with Israel. Neither its privileges nor its pursuit of the law obligate God to grant ethnic Israel any special advantage, or to save Israel by fiat. Fourth, Israel's hope rests entirely on God's mercy, on the one hand because Israel, like the Gentiles, is subject to the wrath of God and can have no special claim on his grace, and on the other because, as Romans 9 emphasizes, God has been, is and will be merciful to them, and to all who believe in Christ, for "the one who believes in him will not be put to shame" (9:33).

⁸⁴Romans 11:23 holds out the possibility that the majority of Israel, who have not believed but have been hardened, can be added back in, if they believe.