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# HUMAN FREEDOM AND GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY, PLAN AND PURPOSE IN THE EPISTLE TO ROMANS CHAPTERS 9-11<sup>†</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The chapters of Romans 9-11 have often been misunderstood and abused. Being read and interpreted out of context, some misconstrued on this text a doctrine of predestination, or a kind of capricious god who elects individuals for salvation and damnation before time, and for whom any attempt to seek God is useless without such predestined selective election. Based on such misinterpretation the doctrines of God's sovereignty and human responsibility were regarded as excluding each other. This article is an attempt to prove that in Romans 9-11, Paul is not concerned with individual election and rejection or salvation and damnation but with the corporative election of Jews and Gentiles in the context of the Israel's problem and paradox. Paul's final solution to Israel's problem and paradox, and implicitly to the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom, is a mystery grounded in divine insight. So, rather than be tempted to rationalize it, we should learn to live with such a mystery by accepting both sides of the truth, holding them in a constructive tension, not overemphasizing one side at the expense of the other.

*Keywords:* election, salvation, mercy, Israel, Gentiles

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## **1. Introduction**

Romans 9-11 has often been misinterpreted and abused. Many have found here a doctrine of predestination with a misbalanced view about the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom. As H. Kung argues, Augustine, through Middle Ages, Luther and Calvin, misunderstood some of Paul's arguments in Romans 9-11. They thought that Paul added these chapters to illustrate and expand his teaching of predestination [1]. The aim of this article is firstly, an attempt to prove that it is not the case and secondly, to give a better understanding of the relationship between human freedom and God's sovereignty, plan and purpose, in the context of Israel's paradox, as it is

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described in Romans 9-11. Hopefully, this attempt will contribute to a better understanding of God's ways and will help to recognize Israel's role in God's plan, as well as to relate better to them in the area of Theology and mission.

### ***1.1. The place and purpose of Romans 9-11***

Romans 9-11 is an important argument of Paul's letter to the Roman people. Its purpose and place is related to the purpose of the book as a whole [2]. We will consider, as the biblical exegesis suggests, that the letter to the Romans is written as a preparation for Paul's visit to Rome and further evangelism. "Paul wishes to introduce himself to the reader by a careful statement of what he considers the essence of his apostolic preaching to the Gentiles. 'Romans is the theological self-confession of Paul, which arose out of a concrete necessity of his missionary work.'" [3] The test of the right purpose and the right theme is the coherence of the letter's arguments. As most scholars realize, Paul's defence of the Gospel in Romans revolves around the theme of righteousness [4]. Chapters 9-11 form an essential link in the whole argumentation of Paul's concept of righteousness.

Paul's presentation and defence of 'his' gospel to the Roman Christians occur during a time of controversy over the relationship between Judaism and the Church, controversy in which Paul is actively involved [5]. The Romans Christians themselves are caught up in this issue. In Romans chapter 11 Paul insists against the presumption of many Gentiles in the community, that the Gospel does not signal the abandonment of Israel. But he also insists that Jews and Jewish Christians who think that they have an inalienable salvific birthright are in error (chapters 9 and 10). Paul therefore warned both Jewish and Gentile extremists, pleading for their reconciliation. Paul's arguments also aim to unite the Christians behind his vision of the Gospel and its implications for the relationship between Jews and Gentiles [6].

Romans 9-11 are required by the earlier exposition as a logical step in Paul's arguments. Paul's theological explanation in chapters 1-8 could raise questions in a Jewish mind. Chapters 2 and 3 might suggest that God's initial choice of Israel and Israel's privilege no longer count for anything that the Jews are not better than the Gentiles and that God should have abandoned them and started afresh with the new devoted people. But Paul had refused to draw this conclusion. "The faithfulness of God to his covenant bond with Israel was axiomatic for the Jew, and *remained so* for Paul." [7]

Thus, Romans 9-11 is not a digression or an excursus that disrupts the natural flow of the arguments in the Romans. It is an important and integral part of the letter. The view that these 3 chapters exist as a separate treatise, is not provable [8]. These chapters contribute to Paul's understanding of God's plan for humankind (both Jews and Gentiles) and of the relationship between human freedom and God's sovereignty. Romans 9-11 reveals not only Paul's theological concern but also his personal concern. He is at pains to see that the chosen people with such many privileges are 'enemies' of the Gospel (11.28).

Paul's concern is not simply a 'patriotic sentiment'. The Book of Acts clearly indicates that Paul was also called to bring the Gospel to "the sons of Israel" (9.15) [9].

Paul's arguments contained in Romans 9-11 proceed in a more 'linear' fashion, usually with each section building on, or responding to the points of the previous section (or sections). It is common in Paul's style of argument, that an initial positive assertion of the theme is followed by a series of elaborations and clarifications introduced with questions [6, p.552]. Significant for such a progressive form of argument is the fact that in each of the remaining units, Paul's argument is to introduce with a rhetorical question that which ties to what has preceded. In the beginning and the end of chapters 9-11, we have a lament (9.1-5) respectively a doxology (11.33ff). For many 9.6 is taken to be the thesis that Paul defends throughout Romans 9-11. While it is true that Paul is concerned with God's faithfulness to Israel, Paul's thesis is more complex. Rom 9-11 is Paul's inspiring investigation of the 'strange' turn which has taken place in the salvation history, an inspiring presentation of how God's sovereignty relates to human freedom. He looks to both the course of history and the divine revelation for an understanding of this mystery [6].

## **2. Paul's concern for his kinsmen: the Jewish paradox (9.1-5)**

The break in the arguments, with no conjunction or particle connecting the two chapters (8 and 9) does not necessarily point to a digression but rather a distinct part of the argument. The break also suggests that the reader of the letter was intended to pause at the end of 8.39 before beginning chapter 9, thus Paul intended these words to be read slowly, with solemn emphasis [7, p. 522]. After "he sings with moving eloquence the love of God bestowed freely and invincibly upon sinful man from foreknowledge to glory, ...in the silence he reflects: *he come unto his own, and they ... received him not.*" Disappointed and bitter, he continues with v1-5 [9].

The problem which lies behind Paul's great grief is that in spite of his works and Israel's privileges, Israel has rejected the gospel. For Paul, the salvation history had taken a paradoxical turn: Israel to whom the promises had been made, had refused the Christ, the One in whom those promises had been fulfilled, while the Gentiles who were not part of the covenant, were embracing the One by whom one may come in possession of Abraham's promises. Their fate seems incompatible with the many privileges and promises granted to Israel by God in the Old Testament [6, p. 560].

## **3. God's Sovereignty**

### ***3.1. The call of God (9.6-29)***

The main theme of this section is how God's call (election), which envisages his purpose, comes into effect. God's freedom in election even

clearly stated (especially v. 14-24) seems to be a subordinate theme. Thus, Paul is looking to the outworking of God's purpose in history and he finds answers to his questions in the Old Testament narratives. He uses types, examples and quotations to illuminate Israel's problems and to explain how God's sovereignty and human freedom relate to each other. The verses 6-13 and 24-29 contain the main points of Paul's arguments, while in vv. 14-23 (an excursus) Paul deals with certain objections that his teaching about the freedom of God in election raises.

Some Christians may have thought that Paul's radical criticism of the Jewish assumption of "guaranteed salvation" (chapt. 2) meant that God had renegated his people. This was not true. Indeed, mainstream Jewish teaching held that all Jews were elected to salvation by virtue of their inclusion in that people with whom God has entered into covenant [6, p. 569] relationship: "All Israelites who are circumcised come into the heavenly garden of Eden (paradise)" [4, p. 47]. Paul denies this Jewish assumption and shows how God has worked in the formation of his true people in Old Testament's history. Paul elaborates his statement in two parallel arguments: vv. 7-9 and vv. 10-13. Firstly, Paul clarifies that God's true people are not to be identified with the natural descendants of Abraham. Secondly, God's choice of Jacob rather than Esau (vv. 10-13) emphasizes the previous point and particularly makes it clear that God's call is not based on merit. 'The purpose' is the word that connects Paul's argument here. The word denotes a predetermined plan of God to bring blessing to the world. *In order that God's elective purpose might stand firm resting as it does not on works but on God who calls ...* [9, p. 182] There was nothing about these boys that could have been the basis of God's choice of one over the other. Paul's argument to his fellow Jews is that God's purpose depends on his call and not on human merit. "Paul's aim is to pick the bubble of Israel's presumptuousness as the elect, not to affirm Esau's rejection." [7, p. 545] He is preparing the ground to affirm the continuation of God's plan or purpose which envisages the whole world: *so He called, not only from Jews but also from Gentiles* (v. 24).

The issue is not primarily God's freedom in election, even if it is an important theme here, neither "the divine election ... operating antecedently to the will or any activity to those who are its objects" [10]. The issue is how God's purpose for the whole world comes into effect. The physical descent is not a crucial qualification to being God's people. Paul implies that belonging to the New Covenant people of God is based on God's call and it is neither a birthright, nor a merit. "If He [God] were bound by physical descent, he would be unfree, and no longer God." [9, p. 180] Israel's election was by grace and also by grace God extended his call to the Gentiles.

It is important to note that Paul's purpose here is not to expound any doctrine of predestination but "to explain the situation in which he finds himself where God's promise to Israel (9.6) seems to have been called into question both by Gentile's acceptance of the Gospel ... and particularly by Israel's large-scale rejection of it ... [Paul] includes the idea of divine rejection

in order to explain what he regards as a temporary phenomena – viz., God's rejection of Israel in order to achieve a wider election, which will then include Israel." [7, p. 546]

### **3.2. Objections answered (9.14-23)**

As is so often the case with Paul, the conclusion to one section (v. 13) serves also as an introduction to the next section. *What then shall we say? Is there unrighteousness in God's dealing* (v. 14)? Paul knows that the way he described God's operation in working out his purpose in v. 6-13, will raise questions and objections. Therefore he makes this excursus (v.14-23) in order to answer these questions. The semi-rhetoric question of v. 14 derives from faith not from hostile scepticism [6, p. 590] and most probably is stated from Jewish perspective. The question is "an invitation to explore how the election and rejection of God (v.13) fit into another key category derived from God, namely, righteousness" [7, p. 551].

Paul's justification of God's way (theodicy) does not seem to meet our assumption and logic. The response may not be what we expected [6, p. 590]. He does not attempt in this section to justify God or to show how God's choice fits in with human response. Rather, he reasserts God's sovereignty and free choice in even stronger terms, from the perspective of God as Creator. Paul's answer is provided by citations and comments from Scriptures (v. 15-18).

The mercy and compassion are entirely in God's hand and God is free to direct these gifts to anyone he wants. Thus, as he gave it to Israel, he is free to give it to the Gentiles. As v. 11 has shown it is not a matter of willing or running (v. 16), it does not depend on merit. This may be qualified as inequality by some, but nobody has any right to his grace (including Jews), nor to the possibility of getting it by human efforts [11].

Paul "considers his theodicy to be successful if it justifies God's acts against the standards of his revelation in Scripture (vv.15-18) and his character as Creator (vv.20-23). In other words, the standard by which God must be judged is nothing less and nothing more than God himself." [6, p. 590] God is the Creator, the ruler of history and he disposes over it as sovereign Lord. To ask accountability from God by the human is beyond our competency [12]. God's freedom to act in this way is the freedom of the Creator over the creature and is directed toward a definite end. His purpose in the process of election (or *hardening*) has the primary object of showing grace and mercy (*mercy for all* – 11.32) in and through the elected. As Actemeier pointed out: "Paul speaks of asymmetry of God's grace, not about the symmetry of grace and wrath. Everywhere in Paul's arguments to this point grace has held the upper hand." [8, p. 162]

The passage shows the initiative of God and his unconstraining freedom in determining who would be his people. Paul does not yet answer the problem he posed in the beginning of this stage but "it will give sufficient hint of

possible answers” [7, p. 566]. Even if the explicit allusion to Israel is muted, the reference is clear. Israel’s state is allowed by God. The Gentile’s inclusion in the true people of God is God’s choice. The inclusion of Jews and later of Gentiles finds its cause in God’s call and does not depend upon merits, privileges or human acts.

### **3.3. *Those called include both Jews and Gentiles (9.24-29)***

These verses return to, as well as expand upon, the theme of vv.6-13 (after the excursus of 14-23) and bring some of Paul’s earlier arguments to a conclusion. We encounter here again the characteristic vocabulary of the earlier paragraph. Paul now explicitly includes the Gentiles among those who are called and elected by God. Thus, God called *not only from among the Jews but from among the Gentiles too* (v. 24).

“It is now clear who the ‘objects of mercy’ are, and ... by way of contrast who the ‘objects of wrath’ are .... It is Israel who now benefits from God’s delay in punishment, and the call in which Israel rested (9.7, 11) is now extended to Gentiles as well as Jews, as God had always intended it should be” [7, p. 574]. What is said about Pharaoh is transferred to Israel “whose hardening and unbelief have furnished the occasion for a demonstration of God’s power and for worldwide publication of the Gospel” [9, p. 190]. Examples of individuals from the Old Testament are brought into the picture, selectively, to point out what God is doing at present. As Kaseman pointed out, Paul sees the Old Testament texts as containing types of God’s salvific methods [6, p. 573]. Paul’s arguments do not envisage “the eternal destiny” of individuals (as Moo) [6, p. 570] rather corporate ‘bodies’.

The inclusion of the Gentiles (v. 25, 26) within the eschatological people of God corresponds to God’s character and actions as presented in the Old Testament. So, when God chooses to include the Gentiles in his people, he continues to act in a way consistent with the original choice of Israel as a chosen people, by grace not by merit and motivated by mercy for all. There is no unrighteousness in God.

Paul’s arguments up to this point (v. 6b-29) have shown that belonging to God’s people has always been based on God’s gracious and sovereign call and not on ethnic identity. The fact that at the present time the majority of Jews stand outside the inner circle of election, which is the Israel within Israel, is no proof of the failure of God’s Word, since it conforms to the pattern of the working out of God’s purpose from the beginning [4, p. 49]. In the course of history God’s blessing were enjoyed not by the unbelieving nation but by the believing remnant. Thus, it was and is now. Even the believing remnant is due to God’s grace (9.29).

But verses 6-24 do not give the final answer to the problem Paul raises in chapter 9. The tension between God’s faithfulness and Israel’s failure or the tension between God’s sovereignty and human responsibility (freedom) is not entirely solved. Paul is building his argument step by step toward the final

solution in chapter 11. We may note at this stage that this section contains no evidence that Paul is talking about God's individual election for eternal salvation or damnation. Paul is concerned with the Jew-Gentile issue. Even the individual, when individuals are specified (Esau, Jacob, Pharaoh), Paul "has corporate groups (nations) in mind with individuals as their representatives" [8, p. 163]. Their individual call has not to do with eternal destiny but rather with the furtherance of God's plan. Even the dispensationalist scholars consider that no idea of predestination to heaven or hell is to be found in chapter 9. "The passage has to do entirely with privilege here on Earth". "We have to do with different ways of God's dealing with people in different stages of salvation history." [13]

#### **4. Human's freedom (9.30-10.21) - Why Israel stumbled?**

Having considered the problem from the standpoint of God's sovereignty, Paul now considers it from the standpoint of human responsibility. What, in fact, has happened? How did Israel, blessed and given so many privileges, fails to enter into God's Kingdom, while the Gentiles once 'not a people' are now the people of God? The most consistent answer of this section is Israel's failure. Significantly, "he [Paul] expresses his point in terms of the letter's primary theme – righteousness [*dikaioyne*] with the counterpoint theme of the law not fully integrated" [7, p. 577]. Paul uses the term 'law of righteousness' as characterizing Israel's pursuit (*nomos dikaioynes*). Because its meaning is inherently unclear, few interpretations emerge. Firstly, it could mean that Israel was pursuing the law in terms of its promise of righteousness but wrongly he sought to fulfil it by work rather than by faith. This nation had made the mistake of understanding righteousness and the law itself in terms of works. The obedience of the Law was reduced to specific acts of obedience like circumcision, Sabbath observance and ritualistic purity. This was too superficial and nationalistic [7, p. 593]. Secondly, the above expression could mean 'the law that testifies righteousness'. Paul would then be criticizing Israel for pursuing a worthy goal by wrong means (works). Israel had chosen to keep focus on the law, then, when Christ came, they failed to recognize him [7, p. 592].

The Jews' failure is not just another way of belief. It is ultimately Christological (10.4). What has divided Israel and even the world is Jesus the Messiah, his cross and resurrection. The fact was the Jews had rejected Christ, Messiah, who brought righteousness 'apart from the law'. There is no excuse that they did not hear (v. 18) or did not hear well. *Did not they hear? Did they really not know?* Paul's answer is no. Paul has an explanation to Israel's problem (chapter 11). Israel's failure must lie ultimately in and within the purpose of God. Israel's refusal of the Gospel is included in this overall purpose of God. Paul proves that with Old Testament quotations (Isaiah 65.1,2).

## **5. The mystery of God (11.1-32)**

In this section Paul gathers together the threads of his teaching and lays the foundation for the final solution to Israel's dilemma. He denies strongly that God has cast off his people. God knew the character of his people before any action on the part of Israel that might have qualified them for God's choice. As in the Old Testament God has kept his covenant faithfulness through a remnant by grace (v. 6) so it is in the present. The Gospel has divided Israel in two parts: remnant (Jewish Christians) and the rest. 'The rest' has been 'hardened' (Dunn) or 'rendered insensitive' (Bruce). From the perspective of God's sovereignty this is God's action and from the human perspective "such inward insensitiveness is divinely inflicted as a judicial penalty for refusal to heed the word of God" [10, p. 201]. In Paul's thought the first perspective includes the second one.

Israel's hardening is neither total (11.1-10) nor final (11.11-32). Israel's resistance to God made the blessing flow to the world but the flood of blessing will be turned again to Israel. Israel's return will be accompanied by an unprecedented blessing on the world (v. 12). It was always part of Israel's call to be a channel of God's blessing to the world and precisely here was Israel's failure to realize both the character and the purpose of its call.

What was implicit in 9.14-24 becomes clear here: even God's wrath is bound up within his purpose of mercy. In the mysterious working of divine providence God sometimes uses human negative response to further his own larger outreach of mercy. The summary of Paul's arguments that resolve the paradox is the revelation that the ultimate purpose of God is one of mercy for both Jews and Gentiles (11.32). In spite of some ambiguity of the text, its meaning is clear: for Jews and Gentiles alike, the only road to God's true people is God's mercy; and "for each the road leads through disobedience" [9, p. 226]. The Gentile preconversion state outside of the range of God's covenant promise is seen as disobedience. This period may have been God's means of preparing them for mercy [7, p. 696]. All, Jews and Gentiles alike, stand in need of God's mercy. The final aim is not salvation of Jew or Gentile but salvation of all men.

## **6. Conclusions**

The formation of God's true people has always been based on God's grace and mercy and not on ethnic identity. It was always part of God's plan that his blessing would be extended to all. The formation of the Church is a continuation of God's purpose from the Old Testament and the Gospel of Christ is the fulfilment of God's Old Testament promises. The reason for which the majority of Jews stand outside of God's grace is that they have abused and misunderstood the law and the righteousness it speaks of. Jews had rejected Christ, Messiah, who brought righteousness 'apart from the law'.

However, Israel's failure is included in the overall purpose of God, i.e., *mercy for all*.

Romans 9-11 does not promote a selective election to salvation or damnation. In my opinion, Augustine, Luther, Calvin and other have misunderstood to some extent Romans 9-11. We do not find here any doctrine of predestination. Though the concepts of God's sovereignty and human freedom (responsibility) appear to be mutually exclusive, they are friends not enemies. Both are parts of the same revealed truth. Romans 9-11 suggests that the doctrine of God's sovereignty from Romans 9 is not complete without the one of human responsibility from Romans 10.

Paul's final solution to Israel's problem and paradox, and implicitly to the relationship between God's sovereignty and human freedom, is a mystery grounded in divine insight. Rather than be tempted to rationalize it, we should learn to live with the mystery by accepting both sides of the truth, holding them in a constructive tension, not overemphasizing one side at the expense of the other. In Romans 9-11, Paul is not concerned with the election and rejection, salvation and damnation of individuals but with the corporative election of Jews and Gentiles. These verses should be understood in the context of the Jew –Gentiles controversy and God's purpose of showing *mercy to all*. Paul could not do more than end with a song of adoration.

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