

Notes on Romans 9.1-29

This is a synopsis with some modifications and additions of the relevant section of NT Wright, *The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections*: New Interpreter's Bible, Volume X (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2002).

III. God's faithfulness to Israel 9.1–11.36

A. Israel has failed to believe, even though it is the promise bearer 9.1-5

Paul begins the third section of his letter with a triple affirmation that what he's about to say is the absolute truth (9.1-2). This isn't just a ploy to get a little sympathy, but a solemn declaration. We don't yet know what he's talking about, but his avowals only excite our sympathy and concern, especially after the triumphant ending of Rm 5–8.

After this emotional opening, the central statement (9.3) of the introduction to the new section is a wish or prayer that he feels he could express but implies he should not. Given the previous eight chapters, this prayer is shocking in the extreme— That he would even be cut off from the Messiah, if it would help— and not just cut off, but 'anathema', under a solemn religious ban (see 1Co 16.22; Ga 1.89)!

When Israel was under condemnation for worshipping the golden calf, Moses begged that he might himself be blotted out from God's book if only they might be spared (Ex 32.30-34, of considerable significance for Romans 9; for the religious ban, see Nm 21.3; Dt 7.26).

In the following two verses (9.4-5), the spectacular privileges of Israel underscore the enormity of the situation. The list itself functions as a point of high irony: most of these privileges are what he has just argued in the preceding chapters now belong to those (from whatever race) who are 'in the Messiah'— in particular, 8.12-30 had much to say about 'sonship' in Christ; Rm 5 and 8 about the 'glory' lost by Adam (3.23), guaranteed in the Messiah; 7.1–8.11 told the story of the 'lawgiving' and its strange fulfillment in the Spirit; Rm 4 spelled out the

'promise' to Abraham, the great patriarch. These privileges, which now belong to those in the Messiah— not least those in Rome' (see 1.7,15)— are the very privileges that God promised to Israel according to the flesh. You Christians, he says explicitly in 11.17 and 15.27, share in the spiritual blessings of Israel. You must now spare a thought, and a prayer, for their present plight.

The final privilege— that they are 'the Messiah's people according to the flesh'— is the center of the problem, of Paul's view of the problem, and of its solution. Note that he says 'from them' is the Messiah, not that he is 'theirs', as other items were. But that they are 'the Messiah's people according to the flesh' is their privilege, their tragedy, and their hope. For 'from them is the Messiah according to the flesh, who is over all, God forever blessed. Amen!' (9.5). That is certainly a privilege!

Oddly, though, as he tells of his grief, how he would even be cut off from the Messiah if it could help, why the problem is so acute, Paul never actually mentions what the problem is.

But he actually does call Jesus 'God forever blessed' in 9.5. In 1.3-4, a statement of what the 'good news' consists of introduces the whole letter, especially its first half (Rm 1–8): Jesus 'born of the seed of David according to the flesh and marked out as son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness that was in him.' Now at the start of the second half of the letter, 9.5 again balances the Messiah's fleshly descent with his universal sovereignty. The whole argument of 9–11 moves toward, and finally affirms, his universal sovereignty as Messiah and Lord; in 10.12, Paul will apply to Jesus passage in which 'Lord' unambiguously stands for the name of God himself: 'There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same LORD is Lord of all'; and 'everyone who calls

upon the name of the LORD shall be saved' (Joel 3.5 LXX). So 9.5 stands at the head of Rm 9–11, much as 1.3-4 stood at the head of Rm 1–8 (and of the letter as a whole), as an initial messianic affirmation in whose light everything else is to be understood.

The Messiah who is from Israel's own race, Israel's highest privilege and final hope, is the very embodiment of their sovereign Lord, their covenant God. It is *he* whom the Israelites have rejected; this is precisely the point Paul makes in 10.21, at the close of the main 'story' of Rm 9–10. Just as Israel rejected their God on Mt. Sinai, precipitating Moses' extraordinary prayer, so now Israel—according-to-the-flesh has rejected its own God as he came in the flesh, precipitating Paul's own version of that prayer.

But because the Messiah 'according to the flesh' is also 'God over all, blessed for ever,' and particularly because his 'flesh' was the place where God 'condemned sin' (8.3), the strange and tragic story of Israel, to which Paul now turns again, is designed to lead out into new life. Read in this way, 9.5 becomes an exact, if ironic, summary of an argument that will now unfold in two directions: judgment and mercy.

B. From Abraham to the Exile, Israel's story shows how election works 9.6-29

After the introduction (9.1-5), the first section has three uneven parts, each introduced by a question or an implied question:

9.6-13 Does Israel's faithlessness cancel God's faithfulness? (the Patriarchs).

9.14-18 Is God unjust to exercise wrath? (the Exodus).

9.19-29 Why am I still being condemned as a sinner? (the Exile).

These are the questions raised in 2.17-29, which then dominated the short but vital 3.1-8, but were not ready to be addressed at that stage. Now, with Rm 3–8 behind him, Paul addresses them.

1. Patriarchs: Does Israel's faithlessness cancel God's faithfulness? 9.6-13

Rm 9.6a ('It's not like God's word has failed') corresponds to 3.3 ('What if some were not faithful? shall their faithlessness cancel God's faithfulness?'). The rest of the paragraph (9.6b-13) goes on to tell the story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, pointing out that God always intended for only *some* of Abraham's descendants to carry his saving purpose forward. This had nothing to do with their merits, but only with his purpose.

'Not all from Israel are Israel' (9.6a). There's an 'Israel' and there's an 'Israel,' just as there were two kinds of

'Jew' in 2.28-29, and an 'I' that delights in Torah and 'another I' that fails to, in 7.21-25; and here, as there, the 'flesh' is set against God's purposes. Additionally, the second 'Israel' turns out not to be just a subgroup of the first— that's the case in the next few verses, but by 9.24 the picture has broadened out as it did in 2.29— 'a "Jew" is one inwardly, and "circumcision" is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter'. This meaning of 'Israel' will be crucially important when we reach 11.25-26.

But for the moment, Paul distinguishes in this way Abraham's 'seed' from his mere 'children'.¹ In case someone might argue that Isaac and Ishmael had different mothers, Paul mentions that Rebecca was the mother of Jacob and Esau by a single father (9.10). Since at the time of the promise these children were not yet born and so had no moral track record (9.11a), God's choice wasn't based on that, either. The choice of Jacob— 'The elder shall serve the younger' (Gn 25.23), reversing the natural privilege of the firstborn— depended solely on the sovereign purpose of God (9.11b-12a).

But this raises the next major question: Has God been unjust? To answer this, Paul tells of the Exodus.

2. Exodus: Is God unjust if he makes choices or exercises his wrath? 9.14-18

The question of 9.14 ('Is there injustice with God?') parallels that of 3.5 ('Is God unjust to inflict wrath?'). There Paul answered that since God is the world's judge, he is bound to punish evil. But God is not only obliged to deal with sin, as judge of the world; he also has a covenant obligation to bring salvation to the Gentiles through Israel. Both of these are brought into sharp focus by Israel's failure.

Granted, in other words, that Israel has followed Adam into sin (cf 5.20 and 7.7-25), what will God do? Paul answers by quoting and commenting on Ex 33.19 in 9.15-16, and Ex 9.16 in 9.17-18:

a. 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy' 9.15-16

Paul first quotes Ex 33.19, 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy'.

God is speaking to Moses about those who sinned with the golden calf. Moses stood before God and offered to be blotted out of God's book on Israel's behalf— as Paul was willing to do in 9.3— but God declared that although severe judgment was bound to fall, some would be spared— those he chose. God's purposes, in other words, would continue, even though Israel was guilty

¹ Rm 9.7 says 'seed'. NRSV translates this as 'descendants', and NIV, 'offspring'. Such translations obscure the link with 9.29.

(the very point Paul insisted on in 3.4). The surprise was not that some perished on the way to the promise, but that any were allowed to continue at all! The status of being God's promise-bearing people had nothing to do with whether Israel *intended* to do what God wanted ('not by the one who wills'), nor with whether Israel exerted itself ('nor by him who runs'); what carried the saving plan forward even though all human agents let God down, was God's own mercy. 'Mercy' is a key theme of Rm 9–11, and forms the transition into Rm 12.²

b. 'That my name might be declared throughout all the earth' 9.17-18

Paul then quotes Ex 9.16, 'Even for this purpose have I raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.'

God is speaking through Moses to Pharaoh, explaining why, despite his arrogance, he has not struck him dead on the spot. Pharaoh has enslaved God's people and resisted the call to set them free. Paul isn't using Pharaoh to explain that God has the right to show mercy, or to harden someone's heart, out of caprice. Nor is he saying that God has the right to do this sort of thing when someone is standing in the way. Nor is God interested in punishing or getting revenge. What he wants is to make his power and his name known among the nations—which would obviously be one factor in bringing about the single, worldwide family he promised Abraham. As with Pharaoh, God is withholding judgment on Israel, so as to spread mercy into the world. His kindness is meant to lead to repentance (cf 2.4-6), even though those who don't avail themselves of it become all the more fit for judgment. That's what 'hardening' means. What is happening in and to Israel serves God's covenant intention, which is to spread the good news to all the world and to bring as many as possible into Abraham's true family.

3. Exile: Why am 'I' condemned as a sinner? 9.19-29

Well, if that's the case, 'Why does he yet find fault? For who was resisting his will?' (9.19)? This corresponds to 3.7 ('Why am I still actually being judged as a sinner?'—in other words, 'Aren't we just puppets, if God runs everything according to his will?')

Paul began with the patriarchs (9.6-13); he continued with the Exodus (9.14-18); now he moves to the Exile (9.19-29). He points to places where Israel, telling its own

story, acknowledged that God had pruned the nation down to a tiny remnant, not only in judgment, but also always in view of his larger purposes for Israel and through Israel for the world. Paul is not presenting 'theological doctrines' like 'justification by faith' or 'predestination'; he is telling God's ongoing story with Israel, in order to make some necessary points to the Roman church that he hopes will become the basis for his further mission.

The argument has two parts, of which the first (9.19-24) echoes the 'potter and clay' imagery that Jeremiah and Isaiah used to talk about the Exile, and the second (9.25-29) quote Hosea's prophecy of restoration on the other side of judgment for Abraham's true 'seed', the point being that God has done exactly as he promised.

a. Potter, clay, and Exile 9.19-24

God's judgment on Israel's faithlessness led to her Exile. The central image of 9.19-24 is that of potter and clay, echoing Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Wisdom of Solomon. The classic passage is Jr 18.1-6, where the prophet watches the potter remold a spoiled vessel into another one, and hears YHWH'S word claiming that he has the right to do the same thing with Israel. This is one of Jeremiah's many images of exile and restoration: Israel will be judged severely, but a new covenant will be established the other side of that judgment (Jr 31.31-4; see Rm 2.25-29).

Similarly, Isa 29.16 speaks of God's judgment against Israel, which has become careless, blind and hollow. After judgment, God will restore his people. Similar themes recur in Isa 45.9, where God decides to bring Gentiles from far away both to rescue his people and to join them. Again, the image of potter and clay makes the point that Israel has no right to complain. God, after all, is the potter (45.12). But in Isaiah's hands, the image also affirms God's faithfulness despite full-scale rebellion on Israel's part.

Wi 15.7-8 develops the potter-and-clay image in a different direction, describing how 'the potter, tempering soft earth, fashions every vessel with much labour for our service: and of the same clay makes both vessels that serve for clean uses, and likewise those that serve to the contrary: but what is the use of either sort, the potter himself is the judge'. Rm 9.21 echoes this without leaving the exile-and-restoration overtones behind, and in 9.22-23 applies it to Israel.

Rm 9.22-23 is a little hard to understand, but the idea basically seems to be that God has borne with much patience the 'vessels of wrath', which are 'fitted for destruction', leaving it at least ambiguous whether they have done this to themselves by their impenitence or whether God has somehow been involved in the process,

² The verb and the noun forms of '(have) mercy' occur in 9.15,16,18,23 and 11.30-31 [twice] and 32; see also 15.9 and Ga 6.16. The verb 'have compassion' occurs in parallel with it in 9.15, and the noun 'compassion' sums up the whole of Rm 9–11 at 12.1.

so that he could 'vessels of mercy' could be 'prepared for glory' by God himself. And their glory, picking up the theme that runs from 5.2 to 8.30, is God's ultimate objective. Had God simply condemned Israel at once, either at the golden calf (for example) or following its decisive rejection of Jesus as Messiah, there would have been space neither for Jews to repent, or for Gentiles to be brought in. God has been patient in order to bring about a larger good. God will still display his wrath and power in the end, but, more important, he will also display 'the riches of his glory' in the 'vessels of mercy'.

Paul never completes the 'what if' sentence of 9.22-23, but instead moves sideways from the reference to 'vessels of mercy'— 'we, whom he has called', are these vessels. The language of 'call,' as in 8.30 and indeed 9.12, is one of the ways Paul regularly describes the process by which the good news evokes the obedience of faith. Paul is preparing for the texts from Hosea he is about to present, in which the idea of 'call' is prominent. But the point of the present verse, reached with a sense of triumph after the long journey through the mysteries of Israel's narrative, is that once the exile has done its work, once Israel has gone through the remolding that the potter has the right to accomplish, then the people who emerge, the 'vessels of glory,' will not be drawn only from Jews, but also from Gentiles. This hugely significant point will become a major subject of the next section (9.30–10.21), and ties the present telling of the story of Israel to that in 3.21–4.25 (cf. Ga 3-4). This is how God is keeping his word to Abraham, the word that spoke both of an ongoing selection from within his physical family and also of the worldwide people who would eventually be brought in.

b. The remnant

9.25-29

Quotations from Hosea and Isaiah³ conclude the first stage of the argument of Rm 9–11. Behind these, we must hear what God said to Abraham right after the sacrifice of Isaac—

Gn 22.16-18 'By myself have I sworn, says YHWH, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in your seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because

you have obeyed my voice. (see also Gn 13.16; 28.14; 32.12).

That was the promise to Abraham with which the whole story began. Paul's quotations from Hosea and Isaiah now refer back to this verse. His choice of texts is not surprising since he's completing the argument he began with the patriarchs in 9.6.

First, in 9.25-26, he quotes parts of Ho 2.23 and Ho 1.9-10. We have to understand both verses together in order to grasp his point. In Hosea, the Lord is addressing Israel in judgment (Ho 1.1-8); as a sign of the judgment, Hosea wife is to bear a son—

Ho 1.9 'And the LORD said, "Call his name Not-My-People, for you are not my people, and I am not your God."

But no sooner does he say that, than he recalls his promise to Abraham, in the very terms used in Gn 22.17, above:

Ho 1.10 'Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or numbered.

And in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Sons of the living God"

—which Paul will actually quote in 9.26. But before he gets to that, he adverts to the reversal of Not-My-People's name which is a sign of restoration later in Hosea:

Ho 2.23 'And I will have mercy on No-Mercy, and I will call Not-My-People, "My People"; and he shall say, "You are my God."

'I will call Not-My-People, "My People"' is the part that Paul quotes in 9.25. Paul also adds, 'and [I will call] Not Beloved, "Beloved"', but the origin of the latter phrase (and why it's in the feminine, when Not-My-People is masculine) is not clear, and Wright doesn't comment on it. At any rate, we can treat it as simply a parallel to the first statement.

Hosea was addressing Israel, of course, but Paul applies the passages to the Gentiles, who were 'not God's people' but who, like Abraham, have been called to believing obedience by the good news (Gn 22.18; cf Gn 15.6; cf Rm 4.3), and hence to a new identity as 'sons of the living God' (9.26; cf 9.4,8; 8.12-30).

So Israel has sinned, and God has rejected him. But the covenant of Gn 22.17 stands, and God has honored it.

But how can this be? Paul now turns to Isa 10.22, alluding once more to the promise of Gn 22.17, but showing what God had to do to accomplish it:

³ Ho 2.23 [2.25 LXX] and Ho 1.10 [2.1 LXX], alluding to Gn 22.17) (run together) and Isa 10.22, itself echoed by Isa 28.22.

Isa 10.22 'And though the people of Israel be as the sand of the sea, [only] a remnant shall be saved. Destruction is decreed, overflowing with righteousness.'

Paul quotes the first part of that in 9.27: A remnant shall be saved. Finally, in 9.28, he refers to Isa 10.23 and 28.22 LXX:

Isa 10.23 He will finish the work, and cut it short in righteousness: because the Lord will make a short work in all the world.

Isa 28.22 LXX 'Therefore do not rejoice, nor let your bands be made strong; for I have heard of works finished and cut short by the Lord of hosts, which he will execute upon all the earth.'

Hosea and Isaiah both speak of a reversal of judgment after exile, and Isaiah shows that this reversal will involve the salvation of a 'remnant', not of the whole of Israel, as has exactly been Paul's point throughout 9.6-29.

Out of judgment, a 'remnant' will emerge (9.27). This remnant will be the 'seed' (9.29), the true 'sons of God' promised to Abraham (9.7-8). Indeed,

Isa 1.9 'Except the LORD of hosts had left us a very small remnant, we would have been like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah'

—(9.29). Those cities were completely obliterated by God at the very time he was promising Abraham that Sarah would have a son (Gn 18.16–19.29). The mention of these cities is thus yet another link in his argument about God's narrowing choice.

Paul's dense web of textual echoes demonstrates that a pattern of devastating judgment, from which only a remnant would escape, is built in to the plan from the very beginning, and has a purpose. The 'remnant,' the 'holy seed' (cf. Isa 6.13; Ezr 9.2; Mal 2.15), crucial to Paul's argument in Rm 11, is where God will realize his purpose. In this remnant, a new word of grace has been spoken to a new people— that is the point of the middle part of the present section (9.30–10.21).

From Abraham to the return from Exile, God affirmed as his true covenant people... not all of Abraham's physical family, but only those upon whom he decided— in order to fulfill the promise he made to Abraham to bless *all*. The background for all this was stated in Rm 1–8: Israel, like the Gentiles, is guilty of sin, and if God simply left Israel to itself, or destroyed it for disobedience, not only would it have ceased to exist long ago, but the promise to restore the world would never have come to pass. But if God did not cast some of them away, that was not

because of their own worthiness, but only to show his own redemptive purposes in them.

Yet 'in the place where it was said to them, "You are not my people," it shall be said to them, "Sons of the living God"' (9.26, quoting Ho 1.10b). This 'place' is the hidden dimension of God's choice— Israel was called, exactly as in 5.20 and 7.7-25, to be the place where sin was gathered into one place in order to be dealt with at last. Israel was to be the people through whom the evil of the world would be funneled down, so that it could be dealt with. Thus the story of Abraham's family through Exodus and Exile down to the Messiah himself is the story of the cross. The extraordinary things Paul says about God's strange ways with Israel, especially in 9.14-24 ('I raised you up, so that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth'), all reflect the theology of the cross that he stated in 8.3 ('What the Torah could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and as a sin offering, God condemned sin in the flesh'). The judgment on Israel, Paul's 'flesh'— including its 'hardening' in unbelief!— is the result of God's purpose that the Messiah would bear, by himself, the weight of the world's sin and death. This is the story of Israel that Paul is telling in 9.6-29.

Paul has returned to the points he made in 3.1-8, and spelled out their full implications: Israel received God's oracles, but proved unfaithful, yet God is faithful; nonetheless, he is the world's judge, and does not countenance evil. But having now demonstrated his point that 'they are not all Israel, who are of Israel' (9.6), he can move on to the next point of his earlier argument (3.21–4.35) and, at the same time, to what he said in 8.1-11: precisely through Israel's casting away, God's righteousness, his covenant faithfulness, has at last generated the worldwide family promised to Abraham.

The promise, and the purpose all along was that all nations would be blessed, and Abraham's seed would be numberless as the sand on the shore. So the question is, how will he make this 'blessing' available? And what about Israel-in-the-flesh, who were the promise-bearers, but who have not accepted to believe in Jesus as Lord and in the God who raised him from the dead?

Rm 9.30-33 are included in the next section.