



The Epistle to the Romans

Romans 9-11: History Matters!

In the last half of the twentieth century there was considerable debate among New Testament scholars and theologians about the significance of Romans 9-11 for Paul's general argument in the epistle.

Some scholars held that these chapters are a kind of parenthesis probably inspired by the references to hope in Romans 8. Paul pauses in the midst of his discussion of hope, love and especially faith to say (quite) a few words about the relationship of Israel to the Gentiles. Then with chapter 12 he returns to the matters at hand.

Other scholars – perhaps most notably Krister Stendahl in the article suggested with our last readings – argue that Romans 9-11 is really the heart of the matter. Romans is of course about justification by faith and about living in hope through the presence of the Spirit, but above all Romans is about the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the great drama of human history.

In the 1960s Stendahl spoke at Yale Divinity School and told a group of students that preachers misunderstood the main question their congregants were asking. Preachers preached as though the most pressing question for the listener was: "How can I be saved?" In fact, said Stendahl, the most pressing question for the listener was: "Does history have any meaning?"

His claim reflects the anxieties of a time of cold war, civil rights unrest and strife both in and about Vietnam. But it also reflects his reading of Romans. Romans 9-11 is Paul's answer to the question: "Does history have any meaning?" And of course Paul says, "Yes," and then shows why he believes this to be true.

There is a further debate whether this discussion of the relationship of Israel and Gentiles in God's providential plan was written in part to deal with particular tensions between Jewish and Gentile Christians in Rome. Whatever the precise circumstances that inspired Paul to write these chapters, the movement of the argument is fairly clear.

Because Romans 9-11 is a large chunk of the epistle to the Romans we want here to summarize the three themes that Paul presents in these chapters.

Romans 9:1-29: Election by God

We have suggested that Paul is a practical and biblical theologian rather than a systematic and philosophical one. Romans 9 provides many of the key texts for the Christian understanding of election (closely related to the question of predestination), but the reason Paul struggles with this issue is intensely pastoral. He is saddened by the fact that while many Gentiles seem to be turning to Christ in faith, Paul's own fellow Jews for the most part are refusing to do so.

Paul's response is also biblical, because he opens Romans 9 with a lament that echoes Moses' lament over the children of Israel.

"For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh." (Rom 9:3)

"So Moses returned to the LORD and said, 'Alas, this people has sinned a great sin, for they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now, if you will only forgive their sin – but if not, blot me out of the book that you have written.'" (Exodus 32:31-32)

Wrestling with the text, not only Exodus but the whole of the Old Testament, and wrestling with the problem – why doesn't Israel believe? – Paul makes three claims in these verses.

The first claim is that God is entirely faithful to God's promises. "It is not as though the word of God has failed." (9:6) However, God's promises need to be understood in a new way. God's promises are not any longer reserved for those who belong biologically to Israel; they are extended to those who join Israel by faith, according to God's promise.

What Paul cannot imagine is that God would break a promise.

Paul recalls his own claims about Abraham in Romans 4 and says that the true children of Abraham are those who are heirs, not to his flesh, but to the promise. We know from reading chapter 4 that this means Abraham's true heirs are those who are made right with God through faith. Paul recalls the story of Jacob and Esau to suggest that while Esau seemed to have the "right" to Isaac's blessing and to God's, it is not by right but by God's electing mercy that God's people are chosen. The section ends with the terrifying verse from Malachi 1:2-3. "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated."

Paul's second claim emerges in response to what he rightly imagines will annoy readers who are seeking to understand his first claim – that even in making odd choices God is faithful to God's promises.

Paul's rhetorical respondents raise two questions. "Isn't this choice of Jacob over Esau and of faithful Gentiles over Jews arbitrary on God's part – and therefore unjust?" And, "If this is all about God's election, how can anybody possibly blame those who aren't chosen for not being believers?"

Paul's answer to both questions is that God is God. (Paul's God sounds a little like the God of Job 38:2-3 "Who is this that darkens counsel without knowledge? . . . I will question you, and you answer me.") But more than that Paul claims that God's election is a sign of God's mercy (not of God's judgment); it is more a matter of who is brought into the family than who is left

out. And Paul claims that the purpose of this is, not only the salvation of the saved, but the glory of God. God has done all this “to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of his mercy.” (9:23) Whenever we read Paul for more than a few verses we discover that while he is concerned for the justification of individuals and the salvation of the world he is, above all, concerned with the glory of God.

Paul’s third claim is that God specifically keeps the promise even to Israel “according to the flesh” because a remnant of Israel has come to faith.

Here again Paul turns to our Old Testament, to the prophets. He has already quoted Hosea in 9:25-26 and now he turns to Isaiah. Isaiah also puzzles about unfaithfulness among the people of Israel and finds that God’s promise can still be fulfilled as long as a remnant of the faithful remain. Paul begins to suggest that – for the present at least – God does not need all of Israel to be faithful in order for God to be faithful to Israel. A remnant will do. (In Romans 16 we learn that Paul in fact has a few Jewish kinfolk among the Christians in Rome – a remnant from his larger family, Israel.)

Romans 9:30-10:21: Israel’s Choice

In 10:4 Paul says that “Christ is the end of the law.” We will soon look at the exact meaning of that phrase, but what it does make clear is that Paul thinks people – including the people of Israel – have to choose between the centrality of Christ and the centrality of the Torah.

Sometimes in his writings Paul seems to suggest that the law leads to sin, or increases sin. (There is a fair amount of this kind of argument in Galatians). But here he says something rather different. (9:30-33) He says that the law may have been good but it is not good enough. You have to choose whether you will accept God’s righteousness through faith or work toward God’s righteousness through the law. The Gentiles who chose faith got it right and the Jews who chose the law got it wrong. (Needless to say any Jew who chooses faith will also get it right; and in Galatians some Gentiles seem to be choosing the law and getting it very wrong, from Paul’s perspective.)

When Paul says in the first verses of chapter 10 is that Israel is zealous for God but ill informed. Because they are ill informed they are still seeking to find God’s righteousness through obedience to the law. Yet “Christ is the end of the law, so that there may be righteousness for everyone who has faith.” (Our trans.)

In making his claim Paul uses the Greek word *telos*, which has come into English in our not exactly every day word “teleology.” The word can either mean “the end” – like *finis*, *finite*, *kaput*; or it can mean “the end” as a goal – “the ends justify the means.”

So Paul can either be saying: “Christ put an end to the law; did it in.” Or Paul can be saying: “Christ is the goal to which the law points.” (This is how Matthew reads the good news about Jesus). Many words have been written arguing about this translation, but either way one thing is absolutely clear: The law is no longer the way to receive the righteousness of God. (If it were,

Gentiles would be excluded from God's righteousness unless they became Jews, and Paul will have no part of that).

Many Christian preachers preach "Pauline" sermons which insist that a right relationship to God is not a matter of striving but of accepting, not of achieving but of receiving. That may well be right, but in this passage Paul is not making a general claim about the strategies for faithful living. He is making a specific claim: Torah obedience is no longer the way to a right relationship with God. Christ is.

In Romans 10:5-13 Paul again recruits Moses (the giver of Torah!) to support his end of Torah claims. He does so by a complicated reading of Deuteronomy 9:4 and Deuteronomy 30:12-14. By the time Paul is through with the text Moses is no longer saying that the Torah is written on the hearts of the faithful but that the word of faith in Jesus – the word of the Gospel – is written on the hearts of the faithful. It is clear that Paul would flunk an Old Testament course in any respectable twenty-first century seminary because of the freedom with which he reads the older texts. He would say, we suspect, that he has good theological and exegetical reasons for doing so.

Then Paul raises another set of rhetorical questions: "How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone to proclaim him?" (10:14)

The imaginary interlocutor gives Paul the opportunity to make two points.

The first point is that right faith is a matter of right hearing – hearing the Gospel and trusting what is heard. This is a claim that has both heartened and terrified Christian preachers from the first century to the twenty-first. It should actually hearten and terrify us all, reminding us that in the Christian story words matter – enormously, and not just the words of the official clergy, either.

The second point is that after all, Israel has no excuse because they have heard. Paul again quotes Moses and Isaiah. Isaiah 65 gives him both the claims he wants to make. God has reached out to those who are not the nation of Israel – the Gentiles. And God has tried to reach out to Israel without success: "All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people."

Yet still Paul believes God does not give up on the covenant people Israel.

Romans 11:1-36: God's Surprise

In Paul's letter to the Romans one of the key words is a very simple word indeed: "All." Remember the words that sum up the opening argument of the epistle, chapters 1-3: "Since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God, (all) are now justified by his grace as a gift." (3:23-24). Now in the discussion of the place of Israel and the Gentiles in God's plan of salvation the term returns again, same theme, slightly different emphasis: "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." (11:32)

In the first part of Romans Paul wants to stress that all people, including the Gentiles, have sinned and are therefore in need of justification. In these chapters Paul wants to insist that all people, including Israel, still live under the promise of God's mercy and are therefore to be included in God's great justifying act through Jesus Christ.

Again, in speaking of Israel, Paul insists on the absolute faithfulness of God. God does not break promises, ignore covenants, or reject the people God has chosen. (11:1)

Then he makes three points about how God will show that faithfulness.

First, he revisits the claim that a remnant of Israel has remained faithful. In chapter 9 Paul identifies himself with Moses, willing to be cut off from the book of life for the sake of his people. In chapter 11 Paul identifies with Elijah in 1 Kings 19, somewhat self-pityingly announcing to the LORD that he alone of all the Israelites holds true to the faith. By identifying with Elijah Paul clearly claims himself as one of the remnant, comforts himself by the reminder that he is not the only Jewish believer in Christ as Messiah. Elijah had seven thousand others, and Paul must have a minor multitude. And then somewhat sneakily he identifies the Jews who have not believed in Jesus with Elijah's Israelites who worshipped Baal. Whatever the details of his criticism of Jews who have not joined the churches, we can be sure that Paul thinks that they and the Baal worshippers have one thing in common: they have got God wrong.

But Paul does not leave it there. Our whole section, 9-11, is framed by the claim that God's electing purpose is at work in history, and Paul thinks he can see how that is happening. Israel's rejection of Jesus has in fact opened the Gospel to the Gentiles. Now surely the roles will be reversed: the Gentiles' inclusion will make the Jews jealous, and now not only a remnant will believe – Israel will believe. What a day of rejoicing that will be! Paul will return to this claim at the end of the chapter, but first he has a parenthetical word to the Gentiles in Rome.

Second Paul reminds the Gentiles that they are latecomers to the family of God. In Christian churches we often hear the question: "Can the Jews be saved?" but the question for the first century church was: "Can the Gentiles be saved?" The Jews, after all, lived with the immutable promise of God.

Paul reminds the Gentiles (and those of us who are Gentiles today) that we are the latecomers to this drama. He uses a horticultural image to suggest the distinction between the natural branches of an olive tree and the grafted ones. Gentiles are those grafted on to a tree not originally their home. As is so often the case with Paul and metaphors this one gets confusing when he starts talking about grafting the original trees back on the branch, but the main thrust is clear. Don't boast, you Gentiles; you are here by sufferance (or grace). Have faith, you Gentiles, that one day Israel will be back fully in the family as well. "If there rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead." (11:15)

Third, Paul reaffirms that the end – the telos – of God's plan is that Israel should be included in redemption, too.

The claim that Israel's acceptance of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God will mean resurrection from the dead is not just a rhetorical flourish. Remember that Paul thinks we live with one foot in the present age and one foot in the age to come. When the age to come comes in its fullness,

there will be life from the dead...the resurrection of the dead, the reconciliation of the world. Paul longs for Israel to accept the Gospel both for Israel's sake and for the sake of that great day coming when God will be all things to all people – Jews and Gentiles alike. (See 1 Cor 15:28)

We suggested in the introduction to this series that Paul hopes to travel to Spain and wishes to enlist the support of the Roman churches for that trip. Spain was the far western edge of the known world, and it may be that Paul hoped that when he preached the gospel in Spain the whole world of the Gentiles would have heard, might come to believe and embarrass Israel into believing as well.

This complicated section of the letter closes with an explosion of praise that might be helpful to us. Perhaps you have experienced the frustration of not understanding something about God – the apparent inconsistency of suffering, the vast injustices on earth, and others. Paul gives this one his best shot. He grapples for three chapters to explain God's ultimate plan for Jews and Gentiles. Then, when all has been spoken, he throws his hands in the air and says, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 'For who has known the mind of the Lord?' 'Or who has been his counselor?' 'Or who has given a gift to him, to receive a gift in return?' For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever. Amen."

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