

# **Paul and Judaism**

## **Hearing Romans 9—11 in Ancient Rome and the 21<sup>st</sup>-Century West**

**A Prep Guide for Sessions 6**

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### **Open – Whiplash in the Word**

I don't love carnival rides. In fact, I've never understood people who seem keen to hop on the scariest contraptions – the Zipper, the Inversion, the Drop Tower. For some reason, I'm not a fan of being thrown around unpredictably, dropped suddenly, or otherwise jerked around. It's like a whole-body whiplash. Too disorienting.

Life hands us emotional versions of whiplash, too. In a way, you and I are lucky that our course is organized to give us a full week between the thrills of Romans 8 and the sadness of Romans 9—11, because the shift from 8.39 to 9.1 is utter literary whiplash. We've just felt Paul's magnificent assurance that "nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" – a pinnacle of Pauline prose – and then, suddenly, "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart." And the mourning doesn't stop there. By the time we finish the first paragraph of Romans 9, Paul has wished that he himself could be accursed, rather than his Jewish kin who have not yet believed. And as we watch, we're wondering, "Was it really that long ago when we heard of the always-with-us God?"

Why is Paul suddenly so sad? N.T. Wright supplies the best brief answer to this question I've found in his Romans for Everyone commentary on this section. And in so doing, he defines the problem that will govern this whole section of the letter. He describes Paul's,

constant mental and emotional turmoil of believing that Jesus was the promised Messiah and knowing that most of his fellow Jews rejected this belief. He was like someone driving in convoy who takes a particular turn in the road and then watches in horror as most of the other cars take the other fork. They think he's wrong; he thinks they're wrong. What is worse, he really does believe that the road he has taken is the only road to fulfillment of God's great promises. What will happen to them? Why did they go that way, ignoring the signs that made him take the other fork? (vol. 2, p.3)

Paul has fully embraced Jesus as Messiah. In fact, he sees Jesus as the fulfillment of a whole lot of, not only Jewish longing, but God's vocation for the chosen people. The fact that his Jewish family have not seen things the same way is a cause of great sadness.

And so, as latter-day readers of Paul, we experience our own scriptural Tower Drop ride – a precipitous plunge from the heights of Paul's confident assurance in chapter 8, to

the depths of Paul's dire dilemma in 9—11. Because of this abrupt change and apparent disconnect, readers have often resorted to seeing Romans these three chapters as a sort of tangent, a self-contained moment of distraction from the main chain of the letter's argument. In this session, we will read these chapters closely and learn together how they are not merely a part of Paul's unveiling of his gospel, but even a central one. First, though, a bit of social context.

### **The Roman Church Before Paul's Letter**

In his very helpful study of earliest Christianity in Rome, Peter Lampe states one of our challenges in this class very clearly: "The beginnings of pre-Pauline Christianity in Rome are shrouded in haze." (*From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, p. 7) Evidence for the makeup of Paul's audience in Rome is sparse outside his letter. But Romans 9—11 prompts us to survey that evidence and add it to what we know from the pages of our letter.

First, the basis for what we've been assuming. Through 5 sessions of our study, we have read Paul's letter as a response, at some level, to a significant Jewish-Christian component of his Roman audience. We've done this because in this missive he spends much more time on "Jewish issues" than he does in his letters to churches he founded, which are mostly peopled by non-Jews – letters like 1 Thessalonians and 1 Corinthians, for example, in which the primary religious context of his audience is clearly his constituency's prior worship of Greco-Roman gods like Poseidon (god of the sea), Demeter (crops), Asclepius (health), and others. Typical for this population is Paul's commendation of the Thessalonians, who have "turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess 1.9); and his attempt to sort with the Corinthians whether Christian converts from Roman paganism should or should not be free to eat meat that has been sacrificed to idols they once revered (1 Cor 8—10). The exception in Paul's corpus outside Romans is Galatians, where Paul's very Gentile first wave of converts have recently been approached by Jewish-Christian teachers who have confused them by overlaying Paul's gospel by insisting that Torah-observance is a Christian essential. (Gal 1.6-9)

Now, on to Prof. Lampe's reconstruction. Before Paul, historians only have solid evidence for Italian pre-Pauline Christianity in two cities -- Puteoli and Rome – and that evidence comes from biblical sources. We have seen that Paul often intended to travel to Rome but had not yet done that by the time he wrote Romans. (Romans 1.13) Well, according to the Book of Acts, he did finally get there – long after he penned this letter. In Acts 28.11-16, Luke chronicles Paul's ultimate arrival in Italy.

*After three months we put out to sea [from Malta] in a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux. <sup>12</sup> We put in at Syracuse and stayed there three days. <sup>13</sup> From there we set sail and arrived at Rhegium. The next day the south wind came up, and on the following day we reached Puteoli. <sup>14</sup> There we found some brothers and sisters who invited us to spend a week with them. And so we came to*

*Rome. <sup>15</sup> The brothers and sisters there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these people Paul thanked God and was encouraged. <sup>16</sup> When we got to Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with a soldier to guard him.*

Luke mentions no welcoming party in Syracuse or Rhegium, but Christian “brothers and sisters” already lived in Puteoli when Paul and his company entered that city, so they stayed a week with them. Then, fortified after their time at sea, Paul and his company apparently traveled over land to Rome. (a 2.5 mile drive in 2023.)

It’s significant that Jewish communities settled in both Puteoli and Rome well before the Christian message did. Flavius Josephus (the first-century Jewish historian) knows of Jewish presence in Puteoli since the reign of August, so preceding A.D. 14, and Philo of Alexandria (who wrote in the first half of the first century) mentions Jews in Rome. Jewish tradespeople likely frequented Puteoli because it was the chief port for Rome and Rome because it offered a large market for their goods. What’s important for us is that Jewish prayer meetings or synagogues predated churches in both cities. The Christian mission to Rome seems to have traced the same routes as their Jewish predecessors, which makes it likely that the earliest Jewish-Christian Christian missionaries who reached Rome (from Jerusalem? Spread by the stoning of Stephen in Acts 8?) very probably settled in the “Jewish Quarter” of Rome (Trestavere) and frequented the synagogues – at least at first.

A next snapshot of Roman Christianity appears during the reign of the Emperor Claudius (A.D. 41-52). In his biographical sketch of that Emperor, the historian Suetonius reports that,

Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus, he [the Emperor Claudius] expelled them from Rome.

Scholars disagree on a lot of things about this report – the timing, the meaning of “Chrestus,” who was actually expelled, etc. But “Chrestus” was a relatively common Roman name and “Christus” was not, so many scholars believe that this is our earliest evidence Christianity in Rome. Lampe gets more specific than most – the evidence is a bit sketchy – but he believes that four historical insights can be deduced:

1. Christians from the east began life in Rome within the synagogues of Rome;
2. As the Christian witness became more voluble, it caused a disturbance in the Roman synagogues.
3. Authorities under Claudius expelled the key figures in this conflict. (Not all Jews.)
4. It all happened in or near A.D. 49.

Lampe finds it likely that this Christian population that riled the synagogue leaders was already composed of both Jews and Gentiles, because the synagogues themselves often hosted a category of non-Jews called the “God Fearers” (Gk. SEBOMENOI) – people who embraced the message of Judaism without “becoming Jewish” through the rituals of incorporation (e.g.,

circumcision). Luke features this group, using the phrase to describe the Centurion in Luke 7.1-10 and part of Paul's synagogue audience in Acts 13.16, 26.

In sum, Jewish communities practiced their religion in Rome for decades before Christians arrived, and the Christians who migrated to Rome sometime after Pentecost (Rome is not mentioned in Acts 2) began their practice of Christianity in Rome as a part those Jewish communities. At some point, the Christians in the synagogue became disturbing to the leaders there – disturbing enough for the conflict eventually to capture the attention of Roman authorities. At around A.D. 49 those Roman authorities expelled from the city at least the ringleaders of the conflict and possibly more of the Jewish and Christian population.

### **The Theological Problem and Paul's Solution**

What does all of this mean for us? I've suggested throughout this study that Paul is "hearing-Jewish Christian voices" as he writes. You're beginning to see why. By the time Paul writes (most date the letter around A.D. 57), Christians have been living and worshipping in Rome for at least a decade and probably longer. The root of that Christian culture lie in and around the synagogue. This means that Paul engages so extensively with the Law and other Jewish categories in Romans either,

1. to answer a still-present Jewish-Christian voice within the house churches (like the voice we hear in Jesus' words about keeping Torah in the Gospel of Matthew 5.17-20), or
2. to equip Gentile Christians, whose worship practices still put Hebrew scripture in a central place, to answer their Jewish neighbors.

Either way, the language Paul uses toward his audience is nowhere near the level of vitriol we see in Galatians. So it does not seem like the faith of the Roman Christians is at stake for him.

What is at stake, and what Paul deals with in Romans 9—11 is the character of the God who called Abraham's family to be the chosen people. N.T. Wright's description above captures Paul's sadness about how few of his fellow Jews have not embraced Jesus as the Messiah. What it lacks is a recognition of the question of God's fidelity to Israel, which is a question of theology. My grad school mentor once wrote an article capturing this challenge and called it, "On Trusting an Unpredictable God." (Wayne Meeks, *In Search of the Early Christians: Selected Essays*, ed. A. Hilton and H.G. Snyder, Yale Univ Press) In it, he refers to "the trick God has played on Israel." (212) He continues, "For if Christians are to accept Paul's assurance that "nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God," they must face the fact that the Jews have rested upon exactly the same assurance, and the radicality of Paul's claims throughout the letter so far has undermined that assurance." (213)

Paul addresses this concern with the most impressive barrage of scripture citations anywhere in his letters. Indeed, Romans 9—11 contain 22 of the 66 cases in which Paul cites scripture in this letter, 1-2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon (a.k.a., "the seven 'authentic' letters" that the guild of NT scholars have all agree to be from Paul's pen). That

means these 3 out of 58 chapters (5 percent of Paul's writing) contain 33% of his scripture citations. To understate, the apostle loads up here, in order to ground his case that God's widening to the Gentiles through the Messiah Jesus need not derail God's plans for the large segment of Israel that has not embraced Jesus as their Messiah.

### ***Move One – God's Freedom to Choose the Gentiles***

Paul begins by reminding the Romans, with allusions to scripture, that God is free. (Some use the term "Sovereign" here.) God chooses Abram and Sarai from out of all humanity, chooses Jacob the younger over Esau elder, chooses to leave Pharaoh in his resistance ("harden his heart"), etc., etc. Complaints about God's choices are, for Paul, like clay shouting back at the potter.

Back in Romans 1.18, as he began his indictment of all humanity – Gentiles first (chapter 1), then Jews (chapter 2), Paul wrote, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of people who suppress the truth in unrighteousness." Here, though, Paul proclaims that God was free to have "borne with great patience the objects of his wrath," with a defense:

*What if God did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for his glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?*

Notice the sheer size of this US! Paul has worked all through the letter to bring all humanity on to equal footing, and now he pictures the fruit: God has shown Jews AND Gentiles mercy, and, through it, his glory.

To drive this home, Paul quotes Hosea ironically. The passage sounds directly on point to a Jewish crowd who resent his levelling.

I will call them "my people" who are not my people;  
And I will call her "my beloved" who is not my loved one.

Here's the ironic twist. These are words Hosea spoke to Israel, assuring them that in spite of their ungrateful abandonment of God, which made them "not my people," God would one day reclaim Israel and call them "my people" and "my beloved." Through this argument, Paul is reminding the people Israel that they have many times willfully left God for idols or left God unattended, like an unfaithful spouse. Consequently, they should have no grounds for opposing God's decision to have mercy on another people (the Gentiles) who have thrown themselves at other gods and disregarded creation's signs of the true God's existence.

### ***Move Two – Israel's Unbelief...and Return***

As I imagine the apostle's heart and mind, I believe that the profound sadness he reports in 9.1-3 is always somewhere in him. His profound experience of faith in Jesus and the theological confidence it produced in him leave him dumbfounded at the large majority of Jews who don't believe. So the issue is personal for him; but it is also very theological. Paul's confidence that God has indeed called the Gentiles to be an equally chosen (though belated) people of God arose from his experience with Gentiles and has changed the lenses through which he reads scripture.

So why are so many Jews not believing? Paul argues for what we might call a "temporary hardening" of Israel. A small remnant from among the Israelites have believed (including Paul himself and some in his Roman Christian audience), and that remnant is a sign that God has not forgotten Israel's election. This hardening or dulling is no new practice for God, who has, in the past, given what Isaiah 29.10 (Isaiah telling Israel that God has caused their eyes not to see and ears not to hear) and Deuteronomy 29.4 (Moses telling Israel they've seen God's wonders and remain dim) combine to call "a spirit of stupor, eyes that could not see and ears that could not hear." (Romans 11.7)

In Paul's theology, then, God hardens Israel's hearts so they won't believe (for a time), while softening Gentile hearts so that they do. But why? What possible purpose could there be. Would God replace long-ago-chosen Israel with the more-recently-chosen Gentiles. "Not at all!" says Paul. (Romans 11.11) Rather, this current (for Paul) rejection of Israel makes time for Gentiles to enter; and as the Gentiles find full life in the Messiah, Paul says, Jews will become envious. So all of this is part of a master plan that ultimately will bring all people together in glory.

Paul does not believe hope is gone for his fellow Jews. However, Paul does believe that all of this hope continues to rely on the belief in Messiah that makes one part of the family tree of Abraham's blessing. Surprisingly, he is confident that "all Israel will be saved" by ultimately putting faith in Jesus as Messiah. "God has bound everyone over to disobedience (Romans 1.18—3.20) so that God may have mercy on them all." (Romans 11.32)

### **Embracing Mystery**

I doubt that Paul's theory of God's large, inclusive plan fully satisfies you.

- ◇ Predestination.  
Some will rightly ask about the justice of a God who "hardens" hearts as a part of the grand scheme. Is this predestination? It can sure seem so in these three chapters. Paul pictures God as the controller, turning on and off people's openness to the gospel. But doesn't this make humans divinely-programmed automatons?
- ◇ Arranged Envy.  
A second snag point in Paul's argument seems to make God into a high school boy who dates another to provoke jealousy in his girlfriend. To some, this will seem much less than a divine plan.

◇ Messiah's Centrality

Others of us will see parochialism in Paul's apparent insistence that Messiah will finally still be the only route home for the Jews. His confidence that this turning will happen seems quaint twenty centuries later.

◇ The Legacy of Antisemitism

While Paul seems authentically to grieve for his Jewish compatriots, some of us will sense that the Christocentrism of his big picture ultimately paints Judaism as an inferior and insufficient form of belief. Paul cannot rightly be stuck with the whole bill of ensuing centuries of Christian anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism; but Romans and Galatians have in them enough fodder for those who would treat Judaism as an inferior sort of faith and (by extension) its proponents as an inferior sort of people.

If you claim one or more of these grievances with Paul's argument, perhaps you will find consolation and some sympathy for the apostle in his final resort to mystery. Having toiled with the Jewish question for three sometimes-excruciating chapters, and after having to picture a God who hardens people for the sake of a greater good – after this excruciating theological experiment of Romans 9–11, Paul humbly takes refuge in a cloud of mystery.

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and<sup>[i]</sup> knowledge of God!

How unsearchable his judgments,  
and his paths beyond tracing out!

<sup>34</sup> "Who has known the mind of the Lord?  
Or who has been his counselor?"<sup>[i]</sup>

<sup>35</sup> "Who has ever given to God,  
that God should repay them?"<sup>[k]</sup>

<sup>36</sup> For from him and through him and for him are all things.  
To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Perhaps you come away, as Paul does, marveling at the vast designs of God. Or perhaps you come away befuddled by it all. Or perhaps you come away angry at the apostle or at God for what looks to you like a raw deal for the Jews.

Whatever your takeaway, this is a lot to sort. Let's walk through it together in our next session. I urge you, in the meantime, to read the text for yourselves a few times. Read, the first time through, giving Paul the benefit of the doubt. Then go back and read it all through once with a skeptical ancient eye, through the lenses of his Jewish and Jewish-Christian detractors who DID see Paul painting a God who has abandoned Israel. Mostly, just grapple with this text; and I'll see you Wednesday evening.