

II. THE GOSPEL OF GOD'S RIGHTEOUSNESS: ROMANS 1:16—15:13 (continued)

C. God's Righteousness in History (9:1—11:36)

Introduction

In recent years the question of the relationship of the church to Israel has moved from the periphery to the center of theological dialogue. Representative of the dialogue is the 2003 volume *Jews and Christians: People of God*, edited by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson. In addition to Braaten and Jenson, the list of Christian contributors includes Wolfhart Pannenberg, George Lindbeck, and David Novak. Jewish contributors include Peter Ochs, Jon D. Levenson, and Reidar Dittman. While neither group shies away from its definitive doctrines, the discussion is gracious and other-regarding. The Christian faith in the triune God and the Jewish experience of the Holocaust deeply color the dialogue.

This ongoing theological conversation means that Rom 9—11, the most sustained consideration of Israel and the gospel in the New Testament, is now receiving unprecedented attention. From being considered no more than a parenthesis in the letter, a peripheral passage of secondary importance, it has become the focus of deepening interest and enquiry.

Romans 9—11 clearly forms a self-contained unit within the letter. Dodd's idea that it was originally a sermon Paul had preached and later incorporated here (1932, 149) is now considered passé among serious students of Romans. It is even more difficult to sustain Barth's contention that it "cannot be simply a continuation of the argument in 1:18—8:39" (1959, 110). Such views have now given way to the almost universal recognition that Rom 9—11 forms an essential component of Paul's total project in Romans. The contemporary discussion gives almost no attention to the topic that occupied the exegesis of interpreters of a previous generation: the notion that Paul is here defending a doctrine of individual predestination. (For a survey of that doctrine, consult the commentary on Rom 8:28-30.)

Romans 9—11 is "a carefully composed and rounded unit with a clear beginning (9:1-5) and end (11:33-36), and with 9:6a giving the text or thesis to be expounded" (Dunn 2002b, 38B:518) much as 1:16-17 served as the thesis for chs 1—8. Paul's concern throughout is to prove that God's word had not failed (9:6).

Nonetheless, the theme of chs 9—11 continues to be "the righteousness of God" as Paul has developed it in 1:18—8:39 (see esp. 9:30—10:4). The theme is now "the righteousness of God *in history*." Because this history is embedded in Israel's Scriptures, a midrashic interweaving of OT quotations makes up more than thirty percent of chs 9—11, more than half of the total quotations in the entire book; and forty percent of these are from Isaiah (Dunn 2002b, 38B:520).

Up to this point Paul has presented a truly inclusive account of the gospel. In negative terms, all of humanity—Jews and Gentiles alike—are considered under the power of sin and alienated from God; in this sense there is "no distinction" (3:22 NRSV; see 3:10) between them. In positive terms—through Israel's Messiah, Jesus—that common bond under sin has been victoriously overcome by God, bringing about a "much more" powerful solidarity of grace and righteousness, leading to eternal life "through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:21; see 5:12-21). The consequence is the creation of a new community of faith, composed of Jews and Gentiles, waiting to inherit the ancient promises God made to Abraham. Now, all the privileges of Israel—election, calling, divine adoption, inheritance, and glory—

have been conferred without distinction upon a community that includes both Jewish and Gentile believers.

The extension to Gentile Christians of Israel's exclusive privileges and the inclusion of Gentiles within the eschatological (= end-times) people of God constitute a major problem. Exacerbating that problem and pressing for immediate attention is another: Not only have multitudes of Gentiles entered the church, but the vast majority of Israel, by rejecting the gospel, appears to be excluded from God's ongoing purpose. The gospel presented by Paul inclusively with regard to Gentiles has been overwhelmingly exclusive with regard to Israel. It appears that God has *included* Gentiles at the great expense of *excluding* God's ancient people to whom the promises were originally entrusted.

What Paul must address is not so much—as has sometimes been argued—the single issue of Israel's *unbelief* but the dual issue of the apparent failure of the gospel with respect to Israel *and* the paradoxical *belief* with respect to hosts of Gentiles. "The credibility of Paul's presentation of the gospel hangs upon a satisfactory resolution of this issue" (Byrne 1996, 282).

This paradox is a *theological* issue, in that it raises the question of God's appearing to have acted in a manner contrary to his original promises. Paul had allowed this aspect of the problem and offered a passing response to it earlier in 3:1-8 in connection with Israel's inclusion in the mass of sinful humanity. Now, following Paul's inclusion of the Gentiles positively in the promise of the gospel (4:1—8:39), the issue of *theodicy* becomes even more pressing. How, in the face of the present paradox, can the ways of God with his people be justified? How can God be trusted to allow nothing to separate his new people from his love, as Paul has asserted so eloquently in 8:31-39, if he cannot keep faith with his ancient people?

This is a *personal* issue for Paul (see 9:1-3; 10:1; 11:1, 13-14) in that so inclusive a presentation of the gospel with respect to the Gentiles risks appearing careless respecting the fate of Israel. Paul is, after all, a Jew himself. Is Paul indifferent to the salvation of the Jews? His future Jerusalem visit—intended as a sacramental gesture toward the Jews (15:25-27)—will be divisive and counterproductive unless the apostle can show that both his gospel and his personal attitude are equally inclusive with respect to Israel.

Romans 9—11, therefore, is no less a part of his inclusive presentation of the gospel than 1:18—8:39. There, Paul showed that God acted inclusively in Christ to bring non-Jews into the Christian community. The gospel of the God whose activity is always inclusive will be complete only when Paul shows that the same God who acted inclusively with respect to Gentiles acts equally inclusively with respect to Jews. (For Paul's defense

of an inclusive ethical pattern that should characterize the Christian community, see the commentary on chs 12—15.)

That Gentiles would eventually have a share (in some limited degree) in Israel's end-time salvation had long been a part of Jewish eschatological expectation. In this sense Paul's gospel of inclusion was nothing new. What *is* new is a matter of timing. First, Paul was convinced that the eschaton had already arrived. Although the old age persisted, the new had dawned in Jesus of Nazareth, Israel's Messiah, tragically rejected by Israel. Second, the apostle reverses the expected order—not for Jews first, then for Gentiles, but for Gentiles first, then Jews—and that only after an extended period of the rejection of Israel.

Thus, Paul's task is to establish the foregoing pattern as the one truly intended by God from the beginning and presently being accomplished by his providential guidance. This explains why these chapters consist of scriptural exposition. Since it was in Holy Scripture that God had announced his plans for the "last days," it is in Holy Scripture that the justification of God's ways with Gentiles and Israel must be found. Just as he had turned to Scripture to account for the inclusion of the Gentiles (chs 3—4), so now he turns to it in his endeavor to justify the present rejection—and eventual inclusion—of Israel, in God's eternal purpose and plan (chs 9—11).

In pursuing the above task Paul first sets up the problem in 9:1-5, after which he proceeds to address the issues in three blocks:

- He presents a long scriptural argument to insist upon God's sovereign freedom to create an eschatological people according to his own will and purpose, without any tie to ethnic identity or human deserts (9:6-29).
- He examines the dual issue of Israel's rejection and the Gentile's inclusion from the standpoint of human response: Israel has been set aside for the present because it refused the righteousness of God and clung to its own legal righteousness (9:30—10:3).
- Having "vindicated" God from the charge of injustice, by way of both scripture and gospel (10:4-21), Paul directly addresses the fact of Israel's unbelief, and then in a remarkable tour de force, holds before Gentiles a "mystery," the final inclusion of those of his own race in the community of salvation, on the same basis as Gentiles (11:1-32): "For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (v 32).

With this glorious vision before his eyes, Paul concludes with a hymn in praise of the unsearchable wisdom and fathomless mercy of God (11:33-36).

I. The Problem of Israel's Unbelief (9:1-5)

BEHIND THE TEXT

Paul is now about to broach a subject he shrinks from directly announcing. The strong protestation in these opening sentences indicates both the gravity of his convictions and the awareness that his fellow Jews may doubt his sincerity. With great tact, therefore, the apostle moves into his subject.

Having just triumphantly declared that *nothing* “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (8:39), Paul suddenly, and without a hint of what he was about to say, radically shifts his mood and affirms that he is willing to be separated from God’s love in Christ—“cursed and cut off from Christ”—if forfeiting his own salvation would gain that of his own people. He declares he is telling them the truth “in Christ” and that “the Holy Spirit” confirms his clear conscience.

Paul does not linger with his agony, however, but turns the reference to his fellow Jews (“brothers [and sisters]”) into a recital of Israel’s privileged status as God’s chosen people. He enumerates the God-given privileges they enjoy as the Israel of God: (1) their “adoption as sons,” (2) the “divine glory” in their midst, (3) “the covenants,” (4) “the receiving of the law,” (5) “the temple worship,” and (6) “the promises.” After naming these, Paul begins afresh with the patriarchs and states their crowning privilege: (7) “Christ [the Messiah], who is God over all, forever praised!” This evokes an “Amen!” This seventh privilege, since nothing in the context requires a firm decision, raises a question that must be addressed: Did Paul call Jesus “God”?

Though never formulated explicitly, the question that lies behind every sentence in the passage sets in motion the whole argument of chs 9—11: that Israel, despite its great privileges and Paul’s labors, has rejected the gospel the apostle preached.

IN THE TEXT

■ I Paul’s avowal of truthfulness in vv 1-2 may have been intended to assure his Jewish hearers in the Roman church that he was by no means indifferent to the fate of his fellow Israelites. Or perhaps the vehemence of his assertion simply demonstrates the energy and seriousness with which he addresses the issue. Whatever the reason, he insists that what he is about to

say as a Christian (**in Christ**; see 6:11) is **the truth**, that he is **not lying** (see 2 Cor 11:31; Gal 1:20), that his **conscience** is clear, that **the Holy Spirit** can confirm this (see 8:16).

■ **2** All this prepares for his assertion: **I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish** [see LXX Isa 35:10; 51:11] **in my heart** (Rom 9:2). He appeals to **Christ** and **the Holy Spirit** because it is impossible to validate what can only be proved by one who knows what is *within* his person (see 2:15). This gives what he is about to say the character of a solemn oath.

■ **3-4a** Paul was wracked with deep and chronic emotional pain (9:2), we only learn in vv 3 and 4, at the thought of Israel's unbelief. Like Moses (Exod 32:31-32), Paul swears that he would be willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of his people: **For I could wish** [*ēuchomēn*, lit. "pray"] **that I myself were cursed** [*anathema*, lit. "devoted to destruction"] **and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel** (Rom 9:3-4a).

That Paul wished for a reversal of status suggests that he views Israel as currently **cursed** and **cut off** (v 3). The formulation of his oath indicates that he now realizes his repeated prayer that he might be eternally damned (see 1 Cor 16:22; Gal 1:8-9) **for the sake of** (*hyper*) his fellow Jews could not be granted.

The impossibility of fulfilling his wish is not because Paul imagines a justified and Spirit-filled person cannot by unfaithfulness to God be severed from Christ and eternally lost (see Rom 8:13; 1 Cor 9:27). Only the Holy One can become a curse for us and thereby effect our salvation (Gal 3:13-14). Paul's is certainly the language of love (see Rom 5:8), but it is a wish a mere human cannot achieve. His willingness to pray this way, "to stake everything, his own life included" on the truth of the gospel, makes clear how unshakable is his faith in the righteousness and faithfulness of God (Dunn 2002b, 38B:532).

Paul refers to his fellow Jews as **my brothers and sisters, those of my own race** [*tōn syngenōn mou kata sarka*, **my relatives according to the flesh/humanly speaking**]. Normally, he reserves the term *adelphoi*, **brothers and sisters**, for his fellow Christians. Thus, he adds in effect: Sadly, our kinship is only skin deep.

It is also noteworthy that despite Paul's normal practice in Rom 1—8 (see 1:16; 2:9, 10, 17, 28, 29; 3:1, 9, 29), he uses the term "Jew" in chs 9—11 only in 9:24 and 10:12. Neither the name "Israel" (appears in the Greek of 9:6, 27, 31; 10:19, 21; 11:2, 7, 25, 26) nor the designation "Israelite" (see 9:4 and 11:1 in Greek) appears anywhere in chs 1—8. "Israel" was the

people's preferred self-designation; "Jew" was the name by which others called them (Kuhn 1964, 3:360).

■ **4b** **Theirs**, Paul continues, referring to his fellow Israelites, are eight sacred and interrelated privileges he proceeds to list in vv 4b-5. First, because they had received **the adoption of sons** and daughters (*huiiothesia*; v 4b), the people of Israel were considered children of God, a status conferred upon them at the Exodus (Exod 4:22; Isa 1:2; Jer 31:9; Hos 1:10; 11:1). Nonetheless, the term *huiiothesia* never occurs in the LXX or other Jewish literature of the period (Dunn 2002b, 38B:526). Perhaps Paul uses anachronistically a term to designate the privilege he has already insisted now also belongs to Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles (Rom 8:12-17, 23; 2 Cor 6:18).

Israel's second privilege, **the divine glory** (simply *doxa*, "glory"), arises from the first (see Rom 8:17-18). It also seems to allude to the Exodus. It was manifested in the pillars of cloud and fire at the crossing of the Red Sea (Exod 16:10), which was a glorious act of deliverance (15:6, 11) and in the theophany at Mount Sinai and the gift of the Law, and the sanctifying of the Tabernacle in the wilderness (24:15-17; 33:18; 40:34-35; Lev 9:23; Num 14:10). Dunn (2002b, 38B:527) notes that Jews sometimes used "the glory" to refer to "the one God"—Israel's gift of monotheistic faith to the world. Paul may also have thought of Israel's hope for the eschatological manifestation of God's glory (see Isa 35:2; 40:5; 60:1-3; 66:18-19).

Paul does not go so far as he does in 1 Cor 3:7—4:6, where he claims that the new covenant, distinguished as it is by the coming of the Messiah and the gift of the Spirit, far outshines the glory of the old covenant (see John 1:14-18; 2 Cor 4:4). Nevertheless, we cannot forget what he wrote earlier in this letter—that all lack the glory of God (Rom 1:23; 3:23); that only through Christ can this glory be restored; or that as joint heirs with Christ, Christians, whether Jews or Gentiles, have the prospect of sharing this glory, once the exclusive property of Israel, in the future resurrection (5:2; 6:4; 8:17-18, 21, 30; see Phil 3:21).

Paul lists as Israel's third privilege **the covenants** (see the apocryphal Sir 44:12, 18; Wis 18:22; 2 Macc 8:15; 2 Esd 3:32; 5:29). He may have had in mind the covenant promises God made to Noah (Gen 9), Abraham (chs 15; 17), Isaac (26:24), Jacob (28; 32; 35:10-12; Lev 26:42-45), Moses (Exod 19:5; Deut 29:1), Joshua (Josh 8:30-35), David (2 Sam 23:5), Josiah (2 Kgs 23:3), and/or Nehemiah (Neh 9—10). Each initiated a unique mutual relationship of loyalty and blessing between God and a representative of Israel.

Following the precedent of Jer 31:31-34, Paul would have grouped all God's previous arrangements with his people together as *old* covenant in contrast to the *new* covenant Christ brought into existence (1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6, 14; Gal 4:24). But, this new covenant is a renewal and expansion of the old covenant to include Gentiles, not a rejection of it.

The fourth and fifth preeminent privileges of Israel arose from the third. Both the Law and the temple cult accompanied the establishment of the Mosaic covenant. The bestowal of **the Mosaic law** (*nomothesia*, “law-giving”; see 2 Macc 6:23) was considered one of Israel's greatest sources of confidence (Rom 2:17-24), but Paul would have shared Stephen's indictment of Israel: “You . . . have received the law . . . but have not obeyed it” (Acts 7:53). Despite the traditional Protestant misunderstanding of the Law as a failed experiment to be abandoned with the coming of Christ, Paul seems to think of this privilege of Israel as he does the others in his list—the possession of all believers, Jew and Gentile alike (see Rom 7:7, 12; 8:4; 13:8-10).

The NIV interpretively translates *hē latreia* (lit. **the service**) as referring to the **temple worship** of Israel (see Heb 9). In Rom 1:9; 12:1; and 15:16 “Paul spiritualizes or secularizes the concept” of temple sacrifices (Dunn 2002b, 38B:527), using the term to refer to the acts of loving service Christians perform in everyday life.

Sixth, **the promises** (*hai epangeliai*; see 2 Cor 6:18—7:1) certainly refer to God's covenantal (see **the covenants** above) assurances to Israel's ancestors, especially those to Abraham (see Rom 4:13 and the comments on the term there; 15:8) of land, progeny, and blessing (Gen 12:2-3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). Unlike Gal 3—4, Paul does not in Romans even hint that God's **promises** and his giving of the Law might be at odds with one another.

■ **5** Seventh, **Theirs are the patriarchs** (Rom 9:5). Paul may refer in particular to the founding fathers of Israel—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (see Acts 3:13), his twelve sons, and other storied figures of prior generations (see Sir 44—49). But he often uses the term simply to refer to all of Israel's ancestors, famous or anonymous (see Rom 11:28; 15:8; 1 Cor 10:1; John 6:31).

Paul's Pharisaic contemporaries' interest in “the traditions of the elders” tended to expand the Law's dividing wall separating Jews and Gentiles. They assumed that “the merits of the fathers, mediated by physical descent” effectively blotted out the sins of their descendants and guaranteed them pardon at the final judgment (see Schrenk 1964, 5:977, for references to the primary sources). Paul was not the first to challenge such notions as presumption. Jesus (e.g., Matt 21:31-32; Luke 13:22-30; John 8:31-59) and John the Baptist (Matt 3:9) before him had done so.

Paul has made a special point of insisting that Jews are slaves to sin as surely as Gentiles and equally in need of justification (in Rom 1:18—3:26). Nonetheless, Paul insists that “the continuity between Christian believers and the ancestral faith of Israel has not been destroyed, even despite Israel’s current resistance, for which Paul mourns” (Jewett 2007, 566).

Writing to a Gentile audience, he can refer to Israel’s wilderness generation as “*our* ancestors” (1 Cor 10:1 NRSV, emphasis added). In Rom 15:8-9, he will claim that Christ became “a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy.” It is the faithful God (3:27-31), not the patriarchs, who opens the possibility of including Gentiles among the children of “*our* father Abraham” (4:12, emphasis added; see vv 11-12, 16-17) and “*our* father Isaac” (9:10, emphasis added).

Israel’s eighth and greatest privilege is that **from them is traced the human ancestry** [*kata sarka*, “according to flesh”; see 1:3-4; 9:3] **of Christ** [*ho Christos*, “the Christ”], **who is God over all, forever praised!** (v 5). Paul completes his list of the privileges of the Jewish people by stating that the Messiah himself is by natural descent a Jew. The Greek phrase translated “who is over all, God blessed forever!” (NRSV) allows for other plausible translations.

To put the matter simply, the scholarly debate concerns the interpretation of Paul’s grammar: Does the phrase in whole or in part or not at all refer to **Christ**; or is it merely a disconnected doxology—***May God, who is over all, be forever praised?*** (Cranfield [1985, 222] summarizes six major proposals; Moo [1996, 565] identifies eight options; Dunn [2002b, 38B:528-29] reduces these to two.)

The ultimate question is *theological*: Does Paul here call Jesus **God**? Some scholars argue that since he never applies that term explicitly to Jesus elsewhere in his letters, he must not have done so here (Dunn 2002b, 38B:529, 535). But Paul does confess him often as “Lord” (see e.g., 1 Cor 8:4-6; 12:3-5) (see Mark 12:35-37; Acts 2:32-36; see Jewett 2007, 567-68). New Testament authors, including Paul, do not hesitate to apply to Jesus OT references referring to the LORD—Yahweh, the personal name of Israel’s God, the Creator of heaven and earth—to Jesus.

This in itself is remarkable, given the monotheistic commitments of early Christians and the fact that a fully nuanced doctrine of the Trinity would not be recognized as orthodox for centuries. Thus, it does not seem implausible that Paul should have confessed that *ho Christos*—the Messiah Jesus—is **God over all** (see Titus 2:13, where Christ is called “our great God and Savior”).

Granted, the grammatical construction of Rom 9:5 is equivocal and might allow for an interpretation that makes a less exalted christological affirmation. Nonetheless, the NT witness to Jesus confirms the conclusion of Cranfield: “In v. 5 Paul is affirming that Christ, who, in so far as His human nature is concerned, is of Jewish race, is also Lord over all things and by nature God blessed forever” (1985, 224).

Such an understanding of v 5 paves the way for a Christian interpretation of Deut 30:14; Isa 28:16; and Joel 2:32, which Paul quotes in Rom 10:8-13: Jesus the Messiah embodies Israel’s law; he is “the LORD” in these passages; and faith in him is the basis of salvation (see the commentary on 10:8-13). “If salvation results from calling on the ‘name of the Lord’ (10:13), then the salvation of ‘all Israel’ in 11:26 would entail their recognition that Jesus is ‘really God over all things’ (9:5)” (Jewett 2007, 568).

FROM THE TEXT

In Rom 1—8 Paul made a point of insisting *that* and explaining *how* through Christ Gentiles may experience privileges once reserved for Israel. But the good news of the gospel of free grace must now face the problem this creates:

How is it that Gentiles are entering into the promises to Abraham so readily while most of his own people to whom the promises were given seem to be missing out? If God is not faithful to Israel, how can Paul proclaim his faithfulness to the Gentiles? (Dunn 2002b, 38B:530)

In Rom 9 Paul returns to the questions about Israel he left hanging in ch 3.

Romans 9:1-5 is an introduction to the apostle’s theme in chs 9—11: “the righteousness of God *in history*.” More specifically, it is the hermeneutical key to understanding 10:4-13. There Paul will argue that Christ is the embodiment and goal of Israel’s law. As the fulfillment of the OT, Christ is the saving Word of God, hidden deep in the human heart. More than anywhere in his letters, “Paul makes plain his fundamental conviction as to the continuity between Israel of old and the believer now, Jew first but also Gentile” (Dunn 2002b, 38B:535).

In these verses Paul claims that far from being a renegade and traitor to his people, it is his Jewish heritage that compels him to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Paul is in anguish because most of his fellow Jews misunderstand this truth, and in doing so “are failing to enter into their own heritage” (Dunn 2002b, 38B:531). This contention helps solve the conundrum of Israel’s unbelief.