

The freedom of God in mercy and judgment: a libertarian reading of Romans 9:6-29

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After enumerating Israel's privileges as God's covenant people in Romans 9:1-5, Paul states, 'It is not as though God's Word had failed' (9:6a). This assertion is then supported in 9:6b-11:36. The most problematic part of this argument is 9:6b-23 in which Paul articulates a principle, appeals to Biblical precedent, cites statements about God's freedom to have mercy and harden, and then draws an analogy between the freedom of a potter and God's freedom. The point which Paul is making in these various statements is not immediately apparent and must be derived by interpreting them within the wider context of the issue Paul is addressing and Paul's argument in the whole of Romans 9 – 11.

This section is often interpreted in deterministic and predestination terms. In this view Paul argues that Israel's unbelief is not evidence of God's failure *because* it had been his intention from the beginning to harden Israel as a whole, making it impossible for them to believe. It had also been his intention to constitute a new community consisting of Jews and Gentiles who had been individually predestined to salvation. It is in this community that God's covenant promises relating to future salvation find fulfillment.¹

This general approach to interpreting 9:6-23 is understandable given the way Paul expresses himself, especially when his language is read against the backdrop of later Augustinian and Calvinist theology. However elements of Paul's argument in 9:30 – 11:36 are not consistent with this deterministic interpretive framework.²

1 E.g. Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* (BEC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 491-523; Douglas Moo, *Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 568-609; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), II 8-38; F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Tyndale Press, 1963), 187-95; John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993). Romans 9:6-23 is especially significant as it appears to provide the strongest Scriptural support for the theological determinism of Augustinian-Calvinist theology and it is an interpretive challenge for those in the Arminian-Wesleyan tradition.

2 The primary alternative to the Calvinist reading of Romans 9 is what might be called the redemptive historical and corporate model. In this view Paul is describing God's freedom to determine the corporate reality for the expression of his redemptive work

In 9:30 – 10:21 Paul engages in an extended exploration of the reasons for Jewish unbelief.³ In 9:30 – 10:4 he attributes their unbelief to a commitment to the Mosaic Law as providing an adequate basis for salvation and, related to this, a wrong estimate of the place of works in ensuring personal salvation. As a result of these commitments they have ‘stumbled over the stumbling stone’, i.e. they have refused to recognize what God has done in Jesus the Messiah. In 10:18-20 Paul dismisses the possibilities that Jewish unbelief is due either to a failure to have heard or understood the Gospel. Paul then concludes in 10:21 that the real problem is stubborn disobedience in spite of the fact that from his side God has been continuously ‘holding out his hand’ to Israel. A Calvinist reading of this would appear to assume that God is ‘holding out his hand’ to Israel while simultaneously withholding the grace that would enable them to respond.⁴ Furthermore, Israel’s misplaced commitment to the Mosaic Law and their stubborn

in history, whether that be Israel or the Church. This position argues that in 9:6-29 Paul is not speaking about God’s determining the destiny of individuals for either salvation or judgment. While there are differences in nuance from one scholar to another, representative advocates of the redemptive historical approach include: C. E. B. Cranfield, *Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols; ICC; Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1975), 470-97; Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 351-69. Joseph Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 558-70; W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902), 250-75; William Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 173-75; Jack Cottrell, ‘The Classical Arminian View of Election’, in Chad Brand, ed, *Perspectives on Election: Five Views* (Nashville: Broadman, 2006), 122-33. Cf. also the Romans commentaries of Leenhardt (1957), Ziesler (1989) and Edwards (1992). While it is easy to argue for this approach for 9:6-13, it becomes more challenging for 9:14-18 and 9:19-24. In the latter two sections many interpreters seem to blend redemptive historical and soteriological comments on the text. An exception is Jack Cottrell who remains strictly consistent to his chosen approach (*Arminian View*, 122-33). For an effective critique of the redemptive historical approach cf. Schreiner, *Romans*, 496-98, 501-2, 510-11, 517; Moo, *Romans*, 571-72; 585-86; Grant Osborne, *Romans* (IVPNTC; Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP Press, 2004), 242.

- 3 Calvinist interpreters commonly create a disjunction between Romans 9:1-29 and 9:30 – 11:39. They argue that 9:1-29 focuses on God’s unilateral, unconditional predestination of some to salvation and others to damnation. In 9:30ff. Paul affirms that even though human unbelief has been ordained by God, people are responsible for their choices. It is argued that these two perspectives are both true even though human reason cannot explain how this can be the case (e.g. Schreiner, *Romans*, 515; Moo, *Romans*, 617, note 8; Bruce, *Romans*, 198). This approach enables Calvinist interpreters to compartmentalize the ideas in 9:1-29 and 9:30 – 11:39. It also reflects the needs of a deterministic system. The approach proposed here argues for a more integrated approach to relating 9:1-29 and 9:30 – 11:39.
- 4 Some Calvinists see no inconsistency in holding these two postures together. Schreiner, *Romans*, 520, writes that ‘...there is a sense in which he truly desires the repentance of all people, yet he ordains that only some would be saved.’ This is a counter-intuitive reading of the text and one dictated by the requirements of a deterministic theological system.

disobedience would be the means determined by God to ensure that Israel as a whole did not respond to the Gospel. This reading is not consistent with the tone of this section and the seriousness with which Paul looks for an explanation for Jewish unbelief.

Paul's statements in 11:19-24 also raise a question as to whether he works within a deterministic conceptual framework. Paul explains that Israel has been 'broken off' because of unbelief (10:20), but then goes on to state that they can easily be restored if they do not persist in unbelief (10:23), and that Gentile believers can be broken off if they do not persevere in faith (10:20-22). If Israel's unbelief was indeed predestined by God, then Paul would be guilty of over-simplification in saying that the problem of Israel's unbelief can be easily resolved by a response of faith. It would also seem odd to suggest that God's unconditional election of some Gentiles to salvation can be easily undone by an arrogance that leads to being cut off from salvation.⁵ It is hard to imagine that a theologian operating within a strongly deterministic framework would express himself in this way.

In all these passages Paul explores Jewish unbelief in a way which does not seem congruent with a deterministic, predestinarian theology. Furthermore, his extended explorations of Jewish unbelief would also seem rather pointless if their lack of faith was simply an inevitable outworking of a prior decision on God's part that Israel as a whole would not respond to Jesus. However if their

5 Paul expresses himself in various ways which suggest that he believes that apostasy or falling away is a real possibility: 1. statements which affirm that arriving at the goal of eschatological salvation is conditioned on 'remaining in the faith' (Col. 1:23; 1 Cor. 9:27 & 10:6-10; 15:1; Rom. 8:17); 2. warnings that severe ethical or doctrinal failure can result in eternal loss (Gal. 4:19; 6:8; 1 Cor. 3:17; 6:9-10; Rom. 8:13; 11:22; Phil. 3:18-19); 3. statements assuming that falling away can nullify the benefits of conversion (Gal. 4:11; 5:4; 1 Thess. 3:5; 1 Cor. 15:1; 2 Cor. 6:1). Other relevant texts include 2 Cor. 13:5-7, 1 Tim. 1:19-20, 4:1, and 2 Tim. 4:3-4, 10. Paul undoubtedly believes that God is working powerfully to keep believers in relationship with Christ (1 Thess. 5:23-24; 2 Thess. 3:3-5; 1 Cor. 1:7-9). However the warning passages in Paul and in many other New Testament texts suggest that this grace can be resisted. Calvinists tend to interpret the warning passages either as directed to those who are not truly believers or as the means God uses to ensure that the elect do not fall away. Cf. Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP Press, 2001). The standard Calvinist treatments of the warning passages are logically problematic (cf. note 20). But the greater problem is that they are reading these texts in the context of a systematic theology rather than their historical context. Second Temple Judaism had no theology of 'eternal security' and believed that apostasy was always a real possibility and danger. If Paul (as well as Jesus and the early church as a whole) took a different view of this issue, then one would expect it to be clearly expressed. As the texts are written, the New Testament warnings about apostasy would have been understood by any 1st century hearer as assuming that it was a real possibility. For a nuanced reading of the warning texts in their historical context cf. I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth Press, 1969).

unbelief was not inevitable, then one can more readily understand Paul's anguished, repeated, and extended reflections on the issue.

The full context of Paul's other surviving letters also raises doubt that the Calvinist reading of Romans 9:6-29 is correct. If Paul were a theological determinist in the Augustinian-Calvinist mold, one would expect this to find clear expression in his other letters. However, in my view it is only in Romans 9 where Paul is responding to a very specific challenge that he uses language which could be interpreted as an expression of theological determinism. This indicates that this language may be determined by the specific challenge Paul is addressing and that the deterministic reading is a misinterpretation of Paul's intent in Romans 9:6-29.

The starting point for the alternative reading of 9:6-23 proposed here is a different way of setting up the question to which Paul is responding and his response to that challenge. It is probable that fellow Jews had raised the objection that if the Scriptural promises concerning future salvation had found fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth, then in the process God had failed Israel. He had failed them because he had not acted in such a way as to ensure that Israel recognized and responded to his redemptive initiative in history by believing. To make matters worse, if Paul was right, then the primary beneficiaries of the time of fulfillment were Gentiles rather than Jews. The assumption underlying this objection is that God is under obligation to ensure that the covenant people recognize and respond to God's initiatives in history, especially the time of fulfillment when his covenant promises found their decisive realization.⁶

In 9:6-23 Paul lays out a variety of Scriptural episodes and statements to establish a cluster of specific principles. Paul's intended application of those principles must then be interpreted in light of the specific question that he is addressing.

The following represent the main points Paul establishes from Scripture and the implied intended response to the claim that God has failed Israel.

First, God is free to determine who will be his people. He is not under obligation to all of Abraham's physical descendants, i.e. to ethnic Israel. The implied application is that he is not obligated to ensure that Israel responds to the Gospel but is free to determine his people on the basis of those who respond to the grace manifest in Jesus.

6 Moo, *Romans*, 568, acknowledges that Paul is responding to these twin problems: 'Most of the people of Israel to whom the promises of salvation had been given refused to recognize the fulfillment of these promises. At the same time Gentiles, who were considered to be excluded from the covenant, were embracing the one in whom these promises had come to fruition.' However he interprets Paul's response within a thoroughly Calvinistic framework, i.e. that God has ordained precisely this reality. Jerry Walls and Joseph Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP Press, 2004), 90ff, take a similar approach to framing the question to which Paul is responding and their approach to interpreting Paul's response bears some resemblance to the approach argued in this paper.

Second, God is free to judge by hardening. The implied application is that he is free to respond to Israel's unbelief in a judgment of hardening rather than turning up the heat of irresistible grace.

Third, God is free to use those he has hardened to further his purposes, meaning that he is free to use Israel's unbelief as an occasion for the Gospel to be preached to the Gentiles.

Fourth, God is free to show mercy to whom he wishes. The implied application is that he is free to show mercy to the Gentiles, those who were not understood as the primary recipients of God's covenant promises.

The overarching point is that when the present situation is viewed from this perspective, God's Word has clearly *not* failed.

Romans 9:6b-13

Paul begins with two parallel statements: for not all who are of Israel are Israel; neither because they are the seed of Abraham are they all children. His primary point is that God's 'true' people are not identical with Abraham's physical descendants. This point is then demonstrated by two parallel appeals to the examples of Isaac/Ishmael (7c-9) and Jacob/Esau (10-13). All four were Abraham's physical descendants, but in each case God only chose to define his people through the posterity of one of the sons.

In each case Paul brings out the significance of this decision (vv. 8, 11-12) in verses which express the same reality with a variation on terms. Paul's point in these clarifying verses is that membership in God's people is dependent on God's grace, his divine initiative, instead of an obligation on God's part to all of Abraham's posterity. In verse 8 the contrast is stated in terms of belonging to God on the basis of 'flesh', i.e. ethnic status, versus 'promise', God's gracious initiative ('not children of the flesh are children of God but children of promise'). In 11-12 the contrast is between belonging to God on the basis of 'works', that is obligation on God's part, and 'of the one who calls', i.e. God's gracious initiative. In 10-13 Paul states that prior to their birth, God declared that Jacob would be the one through whom the covenant people would be traced. This establishes the principle that God's salvific initiative (election) is based on grace (the One who calls) rather than on obligation (works). In view of this, 'the purpose of God in election' (v. 11) is that God's free initiative, rather than an obligation to certain people, is always the basis for human faith and inclusion in God's believing People.⁷

7 I understand that the intent of election language in the New Testament is to affirm that God is always the one who takes the initiative in drawing people into relationship with himself. Election language is normally understood as expressing the idea of 'selection', with Calvinists understanding this as God's unconditional selection of a subset of humanity for salvation and Arminian-Wesleyans either arguing that God's election (selection) is based on a foreknowledge of who will believe (e.g. Cottrell, *Arminian View*, 70-134) or interpreting election in corporate terms (e.g. Klein, *New Chosen People*). There are difficulties with each of these approaches and, as stated,

The question is how Paul intends the reader to apply these principles to the situation of Jewish unbelief. A Calvinist reading concludes that just as God bypassed Ishmael and Esau and chose to work through Isaac and Jacob, so in the present God has determined to bypass Israel and create a community of salvation based on Gentiles and a minority of Jews who are predestined for salvation.⁸

Alternatively, Paul may be using these Biblical episodes simply to demonstrate that God is not under obligation to ensure that all Abraham's descendants are within the 'believing community' (=children of God) and that he remains free to determine who will constitute his People.⁹ When applied to the contemporary situation of Jewish unbelief, this means that God is free to bypass unbelieving Israel and establish a new community from those who have responded to his gracious initiative. Paul would be using these patriarchal narratives simply to establish God's freedom in determining who would constitute his people. The outworking of that freedom can in principle vary from one situation to another. In the case of Isaac/Ishmael and Jacob/Esau, it did not take account of human response. However, when applied to the situation where the Gospel is being proclaimed to Jew and Gentile, God's freedom can be related to human response. The broader context of Romans 9 – 11 clearly indicates that libertarian freedom plays a role in the exercise of God's judgment and mercy.¹⁰

it seems more likely that election language simply has in view God's initiative in salvation. I owe this insight to I.H. Marshall: 'The Problem of Apostasy in New Testament Theology', in his *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove/Leicester: IVP, 1990), 320: '...the primary function of the election language in the Bible is to stress that God takes the initiative in salvation and that his purpose is to create a people who will attain to that salvation. But it is never said that this means either that there is a non-elect section of humanity who cannot attain to salvation or that there is a fixed group of previously chosen "elect" who will be called, justified and glorified in some automatic fashion.'

- 8 E.g. Bruce, *Romans*, 188, expresses the Calvinist understanding with great clarity: 'So today, Paul implies, when some receive the light and others do not, the divine election may be discerned, operating antecedently to the will or activity of those who are its objects.'
- 9 This is also affirmed by advocates of the redemptive historical, corporate approach. E.g. Cranfield, *Romans* II, 479; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 563. Cottrell, *Arminian View*, 124-34, argues an interesting variation on this approach. He believes that Paul distinguishes two kinds of election, one to service (9:6-13, 14-18) and one to salvation (9:19 – 10:21): 'Paul first discusses unconditional election for service (9:7-18), then conditional election to salvation (9.19 – 10.21).' (127) He argues that Paul's point is that just because Israel has been 'elected to serve as the people of God' does not mean that all have been 'elected to salvation'. An obvious problem for his hypothesis is that he has to assume that Paul shifts to discussing a different kind of election in 9:19ff.
- 10 Schreiner, *Romans*, 515, writes that 'Any attempt to carve out ultimate human self-determination in these verses is eisegesis.' No responsible interpreter in the Arminian-Wesleyan tradition would advocate 'ultimate human self-determination'. They would argue that God's gracious initiative in salvation takes into account the

Romans 9:14-18

Paul then raises the question, 'If this is true, is God unjust?' (9.14). Is it right, the objector asks, that God should be so completely free in defining his believing community?

Paul's response in 15-18 centers on God's words to Moses about divine hardening and mercy and God's dealings with Pharaoh (15, 17). Verse 16 brings out the significance of Moses' words, and verse 18 concludes by reformulating the central concept. The heart of this section is God's words to Moses which Paul takes to mean: 'I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, I will harden whom I want to harden' (15, cf. 18). Pharaoh is then used as an example of one whom God 'hardened' and used to further his purposes (17).

Once again everything depends on the issue in Paul's mind as he pens these words. If he is describing a process in which God unilaterally determines the historical and eternal destinies of individuals, then one would have to acknowledge that the Calvinistic interpretation is correct.

The view argued here is that Paul is arguing, against Jewish presumption, for God's freedom in the exercise of his mercy and judgment.¹¹ How this freedom finds expression must be determined by the broader context of Romans 9 – 11 and the challenge to which Paul is responding.¹² Within the framework proposed

human response of faith or unbelief. Schreiner would likely argue this amounts to the same thing and that it is equally eisegetical. In reality there is overwhelming contextual support for the Arminian-Wesleyan approach in Romans 9:30 – 11:36. In this section Paul repeatedly speaks about the decisive importance of faith as the proper response to God's gracious initiative, and does so without suggesting that whether or not one has faith is a matter of God's unconditional prior determination. Thus what Schreiner calls eisegesis is in fact a matter of reading Romans 9:1-29 in the total context of Romans 9 – 11. Osborne, *Romans*, 251, also argues that the full context of Romans 9 – 11 indicates that the exercise of God's mercy and judgment is based on a faith response to God.

11 Advocates of the redemptive historical approach seem to struggle to integrate 9:14-18 into this approach and often shift to discussing the significance of these words for how God deals with individuals in matters of salvation, e.g. Morris, *Romans*, 357-60; Cranfield, *Romans* II, 481-88; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 564-68 (though Fitzmyer has one statement which refers to the redemptive historical approach). By contrast Cottrell, *Arminian View*, 129-33, is an exception in that his comments are focused entirely on the issue of God's unconditional, unilateral election of people for service. He would agree with Calvinists that to inject the condition of faith as the basis for mercy or judgment is eisegetical. He can agree with this Calvinist position because he thinks Paul is talking about election to service rather than election to salvation. However given that 9 – 11 as a whole is dealing the unbelief of Jews and the surprising reality of Gentile responsiveness, it seems that a purely redemptive historical understanding of these words is unlikely. The context indicates that Paul is dealing with the issues of salvation and loss on the part of individuals (who themselves are obviously part of larger corporate realities).

12 John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (1754), argued that in 9:6-29 Paul is simply affirming God's freedom in the exercise of mercy and judgment,

here, Paul is making three points in these verses.

First, God is free to judge unbelieving Israel by hardening them in their unbelief. He is not under obligation to pursue them to the point that they have no choice but to believe.

Second, God is free to use ‘hardened Israel’ as an occasion for his ‘name to be proclaimed in all the earth’. When 9:17 is viewed in relation to 11:11-15, it is clear that Paul sees a parallel between Pharaoh and contemporary Israel. In the past God was able to use a ‘hardened Pharaoh’ to manifest his power and ensure a broad proclamation of his name. In the present God uses the occasion of a hardened Israel to accomplish another good, i.e. the proclamation of the Gospel to the Gentiles.¹³

Third, Paul argues that God is free to show mercy. At this point he has in mind God’s freedom to show mercy to Gentiles, to those who were not viewed as the primary or natural recipients of Scriptural promises. The implied condition of mercy being extended to them is that they respond with faith to the Gospel.

In v. 16 Paul brings out the significance of Moses’ words: ‘Therefore, it does not depend on the one who wills or strives, but on God’s mercy.’ Once again the statement can mean different things depending on the issue Paul is addressing. Paul would have undoubtedly seen it as having broad validity in that God’s gracious initiative is the basis for every human response of faith. However, in this context the statement’s primary focus is on a denial that anyone can dictate to God *how* his mercy and judgment must be expressed: i.e. that God must display

especially in stipulating the conditions for experiencing salvation. The basis on which he exercises these attributes is spelled out in 9:30 – 11:36 where Paul affirms that judgment is extended to those who spurn God’s call and mercy to those who respond in faith. Wesley is entirely correct. However Wesley does not consistently relate Paul’s statements to the challenge from his fellow Jews to which Paul was responding. Wesley’s notes were accessed at: <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/WesleysExplanatoryNotes>. Wesley’s approach is very similar to that of Arminius (cf. Sanday & Headlam, *Romans*, 274).

13 Calvinist interpreters understand divine hardening as prior to and the ultimate cause of human unbelief while those in the Arminian-Wesleyan tradition understand hardening as God’s judgment on prior unbelief. The full context of Romans 9 – 11 supports the latter approach for reasons stated throughout the article. It is also arguable that divine hardening and divine calling are co-ordinate, simultaneous realities. God allows people to experience the consequence of their unbelief (hardening) even as he seeks to break through and invite them into relationship (calling). Thus, for example, Paul can say that he hopes that his ministry to the Gentiles will arouse his fellow Jews and lead them to embrace the Gospel (11:13). Since Paul believes that one can only respond to the Gospel on the basis of God’s call, the assumption is that those whom God has ‘hardened’ are also the objects of his call, his gracious initiative. The simultaneous character of ‘hardening’ and ‘calling’ is also assumed in 11:23-24 where Paul says that the estrangement of his fellow Jews can easily be reversed if they respond with faith to the Gospel. Finally, in 11:32 Paul says that ‘God has bound all over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on all.’ This again suggests that the same individuals can be the objects of hardening and calling, judgment and mercy.

irresistible grace to Israel and bring judgment on the Gentiles. God is free. This means that he is free to judge unbelieving Israel and he is free to show mercy to all who respond to the Gospel, especially Gentiles.

Romans 9:19-24

The final section of this part of the argument (19-24) is introduced by a question: 'Then why does God still blame us? For who is able to resist his will?' Paul responds with an analogy between God and a potter. Earthenware vessels do not question the shape the potter has given them. Furthermore, a potter is free to take the same clay and create different kinds of pottery from it, some for noble purposes and some for common use. Paul then asks whether God is not free to 'bear with vessels of wrath' in order that 'he might make known the riches of his glory to the vessels of mercy which he prepared in advance for glory.'

On first reading this pericope seems to support the view that Paul is describing God's determination as to who will and will not be the recipients of his salvation, i.e. a Calvinist theology of double predestination. The potter metaphor in particular has a strongly deterministic ring. However there are a number of suggestive indicators within this section and the full context of 9 – 11 which point in a different direction.¹⁴

The introductory formula, 'what if', prepares us for the possibility of discontinuity between the metaphor and the theological application.¹⁵ It is thus no

14 Once again it is interesting to note how advocates of the redemptive historical approach deal with 9:19-23. Cranfield, *Romans*, 492, summarizes the point of the potter metaphor with the statement '...the conclusion to be drawn is that God must be acknowledged to be free...to appoint men to various functions in the on-going course of salvation history for the sake of the fulfillment of His over-all purpose.' However, how this idea is expressed by means of the potter metaphor is not worked out in detail. Other advocates of this approach are also vague. By contrast Cottrell is crystal clear and consistent. He argues that in 9:19 Paul shifts from election to service to election to salvation and the context of 9:19 – 11:29 indicates that the latter kind of election is conditioned on faith (127, 133). Cotterell is right that Paul is discussing soteriological election in 9:19-29. The problem is his view that in 9:6-18 Paul is discussing election to service and the subject shifts at 9:19. The whole of 9:6-29 is dealing with the same topic.

15 Cranfield, *Romans* II, 493, argues that the construction of v. 22 indicates an element of discontinuity between the metaphor and the intended application. Schreiner, *Romans*, 517-18, argues that the construction is continuative rather than adversative and thus does not suggest any element of contrast between the metaphor and its theological application. The question needs to be decided on the basis of how Paul actually applies the potter metaphor in 22-23 and, as is argued in the text, there are a number of contrasts between the potter metaphor and Paul's theological application. At other points Schreiner acknowledges the discontinuity when he says that the potter metaphor 'is not transferable in every respect' (*Romans*, 515) and 'we must let the text guide us as to how to understand the analogy' (*Romans*, 521). This is clearly true, but his Calvinist reading of the text is very different from the libertarian one proposed here.

surprise that the formulation of the application itself is somewhat unexpected in light of the potter image. Paul does not speak of God as determining [mold-ing] some individuals [clay] for wrath [common use] and others for salvation [noble use]. Instead he speaks of God as bearing patiently with one group *in order to make known* his salvation to another. This formulation is not based on the dynamics of the potter metaphor and is a clue that Paul may not be thinking in terms of an unconditional and irrevocable determination of the destiny of individuals. Furthermore, there is also a lack of symmetry in the description of the two groups: the vessels of wrath are ‘prepared for destruction’ while the vessels of mercy are those whom ‘he prepared in advance for glory’.¹⁶ It is significant that Paul does not say of the vessels of wrath that God ‘prepared them in advance for destruction’. This opens the possibility that their present condition is due to their own unbelief. The full context of Romans 9 – 11 suggests that unbelieving Jews are ‘prepared for destruction’ because they have spurned God’s call (e.g. 9:32; 10:16-21; 11:19, 23). Paul does not believe that God ordained this, and so he does not write ‘whom he prepared in advance for destruction’. Furthermore it is clear from 11:23-24 that this is not necessarily a permanent condition, that they can become ‘vessels of mercy’ by responding to God’s free initiative in Christ: ‘And even the others, if they do not persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.’¹⁷ The Calvinist interpretation of the

16 The expression ‘prepared for destruction’ has been variously interpreted. Schreiner, *Romans*, 521-22, argues that the participle should be viewed as a passive and ‘...denotes a preparation by God (divine passive) for destruction rather than a self-preparation.’ Cf. also Moo, *Romans*, 607. Schreiner suggests that Paul uses the passive here in contrast to the active voice in v. 23 in order to state that ‘...the plan to destroy the wicked is asymmetrical with the plan to save the vessels of mercy’ (522), presumably distinguishing between first and second causes in the outworking of double predestination. It is hard to believe that Paul would be expressing such a nuanced idea with the choice of a passive versus active construction. Another view is that the participle should be taken as a middle and implies that unbelieving Israel has prepared itself for destruction through its unbelief (e.g. Osborne, *Romans*, 254). Cranfield, *Romans II*, 496-97, argues that the participle simply describes the condition of unbelieving Israel without having any specific agency in view: ‘...it seems probable that Paul wishes here to direct attention simply to the vessels’ condition of readiness, ripeness, for destruction and not to any act, whether of God or of themselves, by which the condition was brought about. That they are worthy of destruction is clearly implied, but not that they will necessarily be destroyed.’ Also Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 570.

17 In their interpretation of 11:23-24, Calvinist theologians seem to side-step the challenge to their deterministic interpretive framework. Many simply restate what Paul says about the possibility of Jews being restored without any discussion of the implications for their theological determinism, e.g. Moo, *Romans*, 707-8, Murray, *Romans II*, 85-90, Bruce, *Romans*, 218-19. By taking the unusual step of connecting 23-24 with 25-27, Schreiner implies that the restoration in view refers not to a present possibility but to an eschatological reality (*Romans*, 611-12). Walls and Dongell, *Not a Calvinist*, 85, note 46, point out that John Piper makes no reference to Romans 11:22-23 in his study of Romans 9 (‘verses which directly challenge his interpretation of unconditional, individual election in Romans 9’).

first part of the potter metaphor simply doesn't work in light of 11:23-24.

It is likely that Paul uses the potter metaphor primarily as a way of responding to the idea that God is under obligation to ensure that Israel recognizes the time of fulfillment. The potter metaphor establishes God's freedom in the exercise of judgment and mercy. The point of the first part of the metaphor's application (v. 22) would be that God is free to respond to Israel's unbelief by withholding immediate catastrophic or eschatological judgment. He has done this in order that the Gospel might be proclaimed to others, to Gentiles and to responsive Jews. (23-24).

In the second part of the metaphor's application, Paul states that God is free to show mercy to others, i.e. Jews and Gentiles who are responsive to the Gospel. These individuals are described as 'the vessels of mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory even us whom he has called.'¹⁸ Once again this statement can be read as reflecting a deterministic theology of unconditional election.¹⁹ But the wider context of Romans 9 – 11 points in a different direction. One of Paul's main concerns in this section is to demonstrate that God does not act out of obligation. If this is correct, then the expression 'whom he prepared in advance for glory', can be seen as a way of affirming that God's free and gracious initiative is the basis for every believer's response to him and their status as his people. Neither ethnic identity nor personal merit obligates God to extend his grace to anyone. God's gracious initiative, his election, is based on his own determination to invite all into relationship with himself. Thus any response to God is based on his prior decision to invite us into the glory which he has prepared for those who respond to his grace. Paul's statements in 10:20-22 are consistent with this interpretation. Here Paul says that those whom God has 'prepared in

18 This and other references to God's call raise the question as to whether his call to salvation can be refused. Schreiner, *Romans*, 500, argues that for Paul God's call is always effective in that 'the call creates what is desired'. This runs counter to Paul's words in 10:16-21 where he says that God has 'called' Israel but they have stubbornly refused the invitation. Calvinists would likely characterize this section as expressing a 'general' rather than an 'effectual' call, a distinction reflecting the needs of a theological system rather than exegetical data. In any case 10:16-21 is clear evidence that God's call is not always 'effective' but can be resisted.

19 E.g. Moo, *Romans*, 608, interprets 'prepared beforehand' as '...a decision of God's in eternity past to bestow his mercy on certain individuals whom he in his sovereign design had chosen.' Also Schreiner, *Romans*, 522-23. In his treatment of these verses Schreiner expresses the traditional Calvinist view that God ordained that the majority of humanity would perish so that the elect could fully appreciate the magnitude of the grace God extended to them (*Romans*, 523). The implication is that believers could not fully grasp the magnitude of God's love if they were not aware that God had ordained the eternal suffering of other human beings (in reality the vast majority of humanity). It also suggests that if God were to ordain the salvation of all, the magnitude of his glory and grace would be diminished. These positions are both logically and ethically problematic, not to speak of being impossible to reconcile with God's self-revelation in Scripture.

advance for glory' can be 'cut off' if they do not 'continue in his kindness.' The Calvinist interpretation of this part of the potter metaphor simply does not work in light of 10:20-22.²⁰

This approach to reading Romans 9:6-29 also works for the even more cryptic statements in Romans 3:3-4. Paul raises the question of whether Israel's unbelief/unfaithfulness is evidence that God has been unfaithful to Israel as the covenant people. The assumption behind the question may be that, had God been faithful to Israel, then he would have extended the necessary grace to ensure that they respond to his initiatives in Jesus of Nazareth. In 3:4a Paul says, 'let God be true and every person a liar'. This can be read as Paul's way of saying that in principle it is possible for the entire world to choose unbelief and this would not in any way compromise the faithfulness of God, i.e. God is not under obligation to ensure that anyone believes. In 3:4b he cites the example of David who acknowledged that God was right to judge him when he sinned rather than blame God for not extending the grace that would have enabled him not to sin. David is implicitly affirming that God is not under obligation to extend the irresistible grace that would make it impossible for him to sin but rather that he accepts responsibility for his choices. This interpretation makes sense of the heated question-answer exchanges that follow in 3:5-8. Paul responds to the objection that since our sin has the effect of bringing God's moral righteousness into even sharper focus, God should not judge our sin since we are in effect doing him a favor.

An irony of the common Calvinist reading of this passage is that it shares an important assumption with the Jewish position Paul is challenging, viz. that God is under obligation to ensure the salvation of certain individuals. The Jewish position assumes that God is under obligation to ensure that Israel respond to his initiatives in history. Calvinism assumes that God is under obligation to ensure

20 Moo, *Romans*, 706-7, recognizes that Paul is saying that those who do not continue in the faith will be cut off and forfeit the hope of salvation. But then in note 57 he argues that the person in question was never a believer at all. The problem is that Paul's language assumes that he is speaking to believers. If he believed that many professing Christians were deluded in their self-understanding then one would think that he should speak to that issue directly. However in this and other similar passages, the warnings are directed to those whom the speaker assumes are believers. Schreiner, *Romans*, 608-9, takes a similar view but supplements it with the other Calvinist explanation that these warnings are God's way of ensuring that the elect persevere (argued more fully in his book *The Race Set Before Us*). The logic of the second perspective amounts to saying that God warns about something that could not happen as a means of ensuring that it doesn't happen. It also calls in question the moral integrity of God that he would warn about something as though it were a real possibility when in fact this was not the case. Both approaches are logically problematic, counter-intuitive readings of the text necessitated by the need to harmonize Scriptural statements with a deterministic theological system. These interpretations also fail to interpret the warning passages in their 1st century context (cf. note 5).

that those unconditionally elected for salvation respond to the Gospel and persevere in the faith. If they did not, then it would be true that ‘God’s word had failed’ (9:6). Paul’s critique of the Jewish assumption is equally applicable to the Calvinist assumption. God is not under obligation to ensure that anyone comes to faith, whether ethnic Israel or a subset of humanity whom God has from eternity selected for salvation. God is free in the exercise of mercy and judgment. He is thus free to extend mercy to all who respond to his call and judge those who spurn his grace.

Abstract

Romans 9:6-26 is commonly interpreted to mean that Jewish unbelief and Gentile responsiveness to the Gospel was something ordained or predestined by God. This article identifies elements in the whole context of 9 – 11 which call this approach in question. It then proposes that Paul’s intent is to rebut the claim that God was under obligation to ensure that Israel recognize the time of fulfillment. Paul argues that God: 1. is free to define his people on the basis of who responds to his gracious initiative; 2. is free to respond to Israel’s unbelief with a judgment of hardening rather than turning up the heat of irresistible grace; 3. is free to use the occasion of a hardened Israel for a broader proclamation of the Gospel; 4. is free to show mercy to Gentiles, to those who were not understood as the primary recipients of God’s covenant promises. The overarching point is that when the present situation is viewed from this perspective, God’s Word has clearly *not* failed. The objectives of the article are 1. to challenge the traditional Calvinist reading of the text; 2. to propose an alternative which is not eisegetical but is supported by a reconstruction of the issue to which Paul was responding and the context of his whole argument in Romans 9 – 11.

Jesus and the God of Israel “God Crucified” and Other Essays on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity

Richard J. Bauckham

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