

## PHARAOH AS A PARADIGM FOR ISRAEL IN ROMANS 9:18

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"What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be! For He says to Moses, 'I WILL HAVE MERCY ON WHOM I HAVE MERCY, AND I WILL HAVE COMPASSION ON WHOM I HAVE COMPASSION.' So then it does not depend on the man who wills or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, 'FOR THIS VERY PURPOSE I RAISED YOU UP, TO DEMONSTRATE MY POWER IN YOU, AND THAT MY NAME MIGHT BE PROCLAIMED THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE EARTH.' So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires" (Rom. 9:14-18, NASB).<sup>1</sup>

The common approach to verse 18 is that the first part refers to Moses and the second part to Pharaoh. I.e., Moses is a paradigm for those upon whom God has mercy unto salvation, and Pharaoh is a paradigm for those whom God hardens unto damnation. Examples are numerous. McGarvey and Pendleton say, "We have had election choosing between Ishmael and Isaac, and Esau and Jacob: we now have it choosing between a third pair, Moses and Pharaoh." God "granted favor to Moses, and meted out punishment to Pharaoh. . . . Moses was chosen as an object of mercy, and Pharaoh as a creature of wrath."<sup>2</sup>

Charles Erdman says, "God himself asserts his freedom of choice in two similar or typical cases, namely, in showing mercy toward Moses and severity toward Pharaoh."<sup>3</sup> John Murray agrees: "As Moses, in this context, exemplifies mercy, so Pharaoh hardening."<sup>4</sup> As James Boice says, "So, on the one hand, we have God making his mercy known through saving some, like Moses, and, on the other hand, making his power known by judging others. In the latter case, Pharaoh is the Old Testament example."<sup>5</sup> So says John MacArthur: "Moses was a Jew, whereas Pharaoh was a Gentile; but both of them were sinners. . . . Yet Moses was redeemed and Pharaoh was not. God raised up Pharaoh in order to reveal His own glory and power, and God had mercy on Moses in order to use him to deliver His people Israel. . . . Moses received God's mercy and compassion, because that was God's will."<sup>6</sup>

A final example is Karl Barth, who says God "chooses Moses as a witness of His mercy and Pharaoh as a witness of [his] judgment . . . . He renews His mercy with regard to Moses. He refuses this renewal to Pharaoh."<sup>7</sup>

In my judgment this alleged contrast between Moses and Pharaoh misses the whole point of the passage. My thesis is that both the mercy and the hardening are actually directed toward the same person--Pharaoh, and that Pharaoh is thus intended to serve as a paradigm for the nation of Israel. God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, i.e., he calls into his service whom he wants to call into his service; but some of these can serve his purposes only by being hardened. Thus it was with Pharaoh. God bestowed favor upon him by selecting him for a key role, but

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<sup>1</sup>Scripture quotations are from the 1995 edition of the New American Standard Bible, unless noted otherwise. For a detailed exegesis and explanation of Romans 9-11 see Jack Cottrell, *The College Press NIV Commentary: Romans*, 2 vols. (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1998), 2:23-303.

<sup>2</sup>J. W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians, and Romans* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing, n.d.), 398.

<sup>3</sup>Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle to the Romans: An Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1925).

<sup>4</sup>John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., "New International Commentary" series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 2:28.

<sup>5</sup>James Montgomery Boice, *Romans*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991ff.), 3:1094.

<sup>6</sup>John MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: Romans*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody, 1991, 1994), 2:35.

<sup>7</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. II, The Doctrine of God, Part 2*, ed. & tr. G. W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 221.

he could fill that role only by being hardened. And so it was with Israel also. God bestowed a temporal mercy upon them when he chose to use them in his redemptive plan, but he also hardened at least some of them (Rom. 11:7, 25) in reference to the role he wanted them to play.

### I. THE OVERALL PURPOSE OF ROMANS 9

How does this passage fit in with the overall purpose of Romans 9? There is considerable agreement that the issue being addressed in this chapter is the righteousness of God, as stated in the question Paul raises in Rom. 9:14, "There is no injustice<sup>8</sup> with God, is there?" Specifically, has God been unjust in his dealings with Israel? Robert Picirilli is exactly right: "The key to the passage is 9:14: 'Is there unrighteousness with God (in His treatment of Israel, which includes the present rejection of Israel)?' Paul's purpose for the three chapters is to answer this question with a resounding 'No.'"<sup>9</sup>

This question was raised in Paul's day by the conjunction of three interrelated states of affairs. First is the unquestioned fact that God had chosen Israel to be his special people beginning with Abraham, and had showered them with unparalleled supernatural blessings from that point on (Rom. 9:4-5). He had nursed and nurtured them uniquely for two millennia.

Second is the Jews' own common assumption that their special relationship with God included an implicit promise of salvation for practically every individual Israelite. Their attitude seemed to be, "God chose us to be his own special people; therefore he is obligated to save us." As Picirilli says, "Those Jews would contend that God had unconditionally promised to save all Israel and would therefore be unrighteous if He failed to keep that promise."<sup>10</sup> Forlines calls this "the Jewish problem," i.e., the belief that God unconditionally promised all the seed of Abraham eternal life in the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>11</sup> Forster and Marston sum it up thus: "The rabbis believed that if a man entered into the election of the nation of Israel (either by birth or by choice) he was assured of a right standing before God." They add, "A widely accepted idea was that: 'All Israel has a share in the world to come.' As long as one did not become obviously wicked or heretical, being an Israelite was a guarantee of eventual salvation."<sup>12</sup>

Cranfield cites the following statements as characteristic of this assumption: "Circumcised men do not descend into Gehenna." "At the last Abraham will sit at the entrance to Gehenna and will not let any circumcised man of Israel go down there." "Circumcision will deliver Israel from Gehenna."<sup>13</sup>

The third state of affairs is Paul's emphatic teaching in Romans 1-8 that most Jews were in fact lost. In chapter two he declares that their reliance on their physical Jewishness, symbolized by their possession of the Law and circumcision, is a vain basis for hope. As far as salvation is concerned, God impartially treats Jews and Gentiles alike. "What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin" (Rom. 3:9). This fact was the source of "great sorrow and unceasing grief" for Paul (Rom. 9:2), but to the Jews

<sup>8</sup>The Greek word is *adikia*, "unrighteousness, injustice, unfaithfulness."

<sup>9</sup>Robert Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will: Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism and Arminianism* (Nashville: Randall House, 2002), 71.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>11</sup>F. Leroy Forlines, *The Quest for Truth: Answering Life's Inescapable Questions* (Nashville: Randall House, 2001), 347.

<sup>12</sup>Roger T. Forster and V. Paul Marston, *God's Strategy in Human History* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1973), 125, 221.

<sup>13</sup>Cited, with bibliographical data, in C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., "The International Critical Commentary," new series (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975; 1990 corrected printing), 1:172, note 1. See also Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 569, note 2.

themselves such a claim implied that God was dealing unfairly with them. If masses of Jews are unsaved, this means that God's promises to them have failed, and he is therefore unrighteous.<sup>14</sup>

Paul knows that in view of these three facts, the question of God's righteousness (fairness, justice) in his treatment of the Jews will arise. Is God unrighteous when he does not automatically save the Jews? How can God reject those whom he has elected? Godet calls this "the greatest enigma in history: the *rejection* of the *elect* people."<sup>15</sup> After raising this issue in Romans one and two, Paul begins dealing with it in chapter three: "Then what advantage has the Jew?" (Rom. 3:1), but he postpones a detailed discussion of the problem until chapter nine. Here he specifically raises the question of God's righteousness: does the non-salvation of the Jews mean that he has broken his covenant promises to them? "May it never be!" Paul emphatically says (Rom. 9:14). Indeed, "it is not as though the word of God has failed" (Rom. 9:6).

There is widespread agreement that everything Paul is doing in Romans 9-11 is designed to establish this point. There is strong disagreement, however, concerning HOW the material in these chapters shows that God's promises to Israel have not failed. All agree that the theme of divine election is the main point, but the disagreement is over the *nature* of this election. Specifically, is Paul talking about election to *salvation*, or election to *service*?

The Calvinist approach is that in Romans 9 Paul is teaching the Augustinian doctrine of predestination, i.e., the unconditional election of some individuals to salvation (and for many, the unconditional reprobation of all others to hell). The question is framed thus: why are some (Jews) saved and others lost? The answer is that it is simply a matter of God's sovereign, unconditional choice. Thus interpreted, says Forlines, "Romans 9 is considered to be the bedrock of Calvinism."<sup>16</sup>

An example of this is William G. T. Shedd. Though Romans 1-8 shows that salvation is by faith, Romans 9-11 is added to show that "the ultimate reason why the individual believes, is that God elects him to faith, and produces it within him." Redemption thus rests upon "the divine sovereignty in the bestowment of regenerating grace." After touching on election in 8:28-33, Paul "now enters upon the full examination of it, together with the correlated doctrine of reprobation."<sup>17</sup>

A contemporary example is John Piper, who asks, "Does election in Rom 9:1-23 concern nations or individuals? And does it concern historical roles or eternal destinies?" His answer: "The evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the view that Paul's concern is for the *eternal* destinies of those *within* the nation of Israel who are saved and who are accursed."<sup>18</sup> Thomas Schreiner agrees. He remarks that "Calvinists typically appeal to Romans 9 to support their theology of divine election. In particular, they assert that Romans 9 teaches that God unconditionally elects individuals to be saved."<sup>19</sup> Another example is Steven Baugh, who says that Romans 9 "teaches divine election and

<sup>14</sup>"Jewish thought assumed that if masses of Jews were unsaved, that would mean that God's promise had failed. That would mean that God would be unrighteous or unjust because He would be failing to live up to His promise of eternal life to all Jews, as it was given in the Abrahamic covenant" (Forlines, *Quest*, 357).

<sup>15</sup>Frederic L. Godet, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, tr. A. Cusin, ed. Talbot W. Chambers (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956 reprint of 1883 ed.), 336-337.

<sup>16</sup>Forlines, *Quest*, 345. C. Gordon Olson says that Calvinists see Rom. 9 as "a lynchpin in their case for God's sovereignty manifest in the unconditional election of individuals" (*Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive, Mediate Theology of Salvation* [Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002], 72).

<sup>17</sup>William G. T. Shedd, *A Critical and Doctrinal Commentary on the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1967 reprint of 1879 ed.), 271-272.

<sup>18</sup>John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 15, 71.

<sup>19</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation?" in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 89.

predestination of individuals to salvation, and the hardening of whom God wills," the doctrine "defended so ably by Augustine and many of his theological successors."<sup>20</sup>

Some Arminians (non-Calvinists) actually agree with this view up to a point. They, too, understand Paul to be explaining why some (Jews) are saved and some are lost. I.e., they see Paul as speaking of election to salvation. For example, Picirilli says of Romans 9, "The purpose of verses 14-24 is to argue that the sovereign God is the one who determines who will be saved. . . . God still saves whom He wills and damns whom He wills, Jews or otherwise."<sup>21</sup> According to Forlines, Rom. 9:15 introduces an illustration that supports the principle "that some, but not all, from among Israel are chosen for salvation." Citing v. 18 he says, "Mercy in this context refers to the bestowal of salvation."<sup>22</sup>

How is this different from the Calvinist view? It differs in that the Arminians who read Romans 9 in terms of election to salvation assume and assert that this election is conditional,<sup>23</sup> or corporate,<sup>24</sup> or according to foreknowledge.<sup>25</sup> Such qualifications of the election of which Paul writes in this chapter are not drawn from the text itself, however, but are imported from other biblical passages (e.g., Rom. 8:29). Also, in my judgment these qualifications are quite difficult to sustain in view of the teaching of Romans 9 itself. But this is not a problem, since in the final analysis it is not necessary for Arminians to attempt to apply such qualifications to this election, since it is not an election to salvation at all, but an election to service.

Whether it be presented by Calvinists or Arminians, my contention is that this soteriological interpretation of the election in Romans 9 does not really address the question of God's righteousness, but rather compounds it. It does not address the question, because it does not even deal with the role of ethnic Israel as a whole, which is really what the problem is all about. In the minds of the Jews the problem was simply this: "Why are so many Jews lost, when God has promised to save them all?"

According to most Calvinists, Paul's answer to this question goes something like this: "It's true that God made a covenant with Abraham and with Israel that includes salvation promises. So why are not all Jews saved? Because God never intended to give this salvation to *all* Jews in the first place. All along he had planned to make a division within Israel, unconditionally bestowing salvation on some and unconditionally withholding it from the rest."

My question is this: How does this answer the charge that God is unrighteous or unfair in his dealings with the Jews? In my judgment this is *no answer at all* to the main question! If this is all Paul can say, then God is made to appear even more unrighteous and unfair than ever.

I believe that the only approach to Romans 9 that truly addresses the issue of God's righteousness as it relates to ethnic Israel is that the election spoken of in verses 7-18 is election to service. Paul's thesis is that the word of God (i.e., his promises to Israel) have not failed (Rom. 9:6a). Why not? The key to Paul's answer is Rom. 9:6b, "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel."

Here Paul is not distinguishing between two groups within Israel, the saved and the lost, with the following discussion focusing on how God unconditionally makes the distinction. Rather, the contrast between the two groups is

<sup>20</sup>Steven M. Baugh, "'God's Purpose According to Election': Paul's Argument in Romans 9," accessed at the following internet address: [alliancenet.org/pub/mr/mr98/1998.06.NovDec/mr9806.smb.romans.html](http://alliancenet.org/pub/mr/mr98/1998.06.NovDec/mr9806.smb.romans.html), pp. 1, 7.

<sup>21</sup>Picirilli, *Grace*, 72.

<sup>22</sup>Forlines, *Quest*, 366, 370.

<sup>23</sup>Forlines, *Quest*, 367-369. Picirilli, *Grace*, 73-74.

<sup>24</sup>Olson, *Beyond Calvinism*, 73-77.

<sup>25</sup>Pelagius says of Rom. 9:15, "This means: I will have mercy on him whom I have foreknown will be able to deserve compassion" (*Pelagius's Commentary on Romans*, 117, cited in Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament, VI: Romans* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998], 255). Similar quotes are given from Ambrosiaster (*ibid.*, 252, 255) and Apollinaris of Laodicea (*ibid.*, 258).

of a different sort altogether. There *are* two groups, but they are not completely distinct from one another. One is actually *inside* the other, as a smaller body within a larger body. Both groups are called Israel, but they are different kinds of Israel. The larger one is ethnic Israel, the physical nation as a whole; the smaller belongs to this group but is distinguished as a separate entity by certain spiritual characteristics. The latter is the true spiritual Israel, the remnant of true believers who enjoy the blessings of eternal salvation.

But the contrast between these two Israels is not that one is saved while the other is lost. This cannot be, since the smaller (saved) group is also a part of the larger body. What is the key difference between these two Israels, and why does Paul even bring it up here? The key difference is that *God's covenant promises to these two groups are not the same*. The promises God has made to ethnic Israel are different from the promises he has made to spiritual Israel. Paul is saying, in effect, "You think God has been unfair to ethnic Israel because all Jews are not saved? Don't you know there are TWO Israels, each with a different set of promises? You are actually *confusing* these two Israels. You are taking the salvation promises that apply only to the smaller group and are mistakenly trying to apply them to Israel as a whole."

Here is the point: there are two "chosen peoples," two Israels; but only one has been chosen for salvation, namely, remnant Israel. Contrary to what the Jews commonly thought, ethnic Israel as a whole was *not* chosen for salvation but for service. God's covenant promises to physical Israel as such had to do only with the role of the nation in God's historical plan of redemption. Their election was *utilitarian*, not redemptive. God chose them to serve a purpose. And though this purpose was of the utmost importance as far as the plan of redemption is concerned (see Rom. 9:5), it did not entail that all who were involved in this purpose would be saved.

The Jews themselves thought that the covenant made with the nation as a whole involved the promise of salvation for individuals within this covenant, but they were simply mistaken. This same mistake lies at the root of the view that the election in Romans 9 is election to salvation. This is Piper's root exegetical error, as he strains mightily to read salvation content into the blessings described in Rom. 9:4-5.<sup>26</sup> E.g., he asserts that the "glory" belonging to Israel is "a future, eschatological glory,"<sup>27</sup> rather than the *shekinah* glory of God's visible presence to pilgrim Israel.<sup>28</sup> He concludes that "each of the benefits listed in 9:4,5 has saving, eschatological implications for Israel,"<sup>29</sup> and then proceeds to try to explain why such benefits were not enjoyed by all Jews. His answer, of course, is that God makes a distinction within Israel, unconditionally choosing to apply these saving benefits to only some Jews.

Schreiner takes a similar approach, saying that Paul's thesis in Romans 9-11 as stated in Rom. 9:6--that "the word of God has not failed"--refers to God's promises to save his people Israel. "The particular question in mind in verses 1-5 relates to the salvation of Israel, and thus the claim that God's word has not failed (9:6) must be interpreted in relationship to the issue that is at the forefront of Paul's mind--namely, the salvation of Israel."<sup>30</sup>

Even Forlines, an Arminian, interprets God's covenant promises to Abraham and his seed (as in Gen 13:14-15; 17:8) as including "the promise of eternal life." "The Abrahamic Covenant is the basic redemptive Covenant," he says.<sup>31</sup> But this is simply not true. The terms of the covenant God made with Abraham and later with Israel as a whole did not include a promise to save *anyone* simply because he or she was a member of the covenant people. Salvation came from a trusting surrender to the God of the covenant (Gen. 15:6). The key promise God made to Abraham and his seed was this: "In you all the families of the earth will be blessed" (Gen. 12:3), a promise that was fulfilled when "the Christ according to the flesh" ultimately came from Israel (Rom. 9:5). All the other promises and blessings were

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<sup>26</sup>Piper, *Justification*, 21-44.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>28</sup>Jack Cottrell, *Romans*, 2:53.

<sup>29</sup>Piper, *Justification*, 49.

<sup>30</sup>Schreiner, "Romans 9," 91.

<sup>31</sup>Forlines, *Quest*, 363, 377.

subordinate to this one and were designed to bring about its fulfillment. None involved a promise of eternal salvation for the individual members of the covenant people. The blessings listed by Paul in Rom. 9:4-5 do not include salvation content.<sup>32</sup>

The *main point* of Paul's discussion in Romans 9 is that God has the sovereign right to make this distinction between election for service and election for salvation, and to choose individuals or nations to fill certain roles in his plan without also saving them. This is exactly what God has done with ethnic Israel. This nation was unconditionally (yes, *unconditionally!*) chosen for service, but this election simply did not at the same time unconditionally bestow salvation upon all so elected. Jesus' choosing of the twelve apostles (John 15:16) is almost an exact parallel, *as is the choosing of Pharaoh* (Rom. 9:17-18). The fact that God used Pharaoh for his redemptive purposes did not require the latter to be saved, and the same is true of Israel. If God wants to use the Jews in his service yet deny them salvation because of their unbelief, that is perfectly consistent with his righteous nature and his covenant promises. God is completely within his rights when he does this (Rom. 9:19-21).

Where does salvation enter the picture? Salvation is bestowed upon spiritual Israel only--the "vessels of mercy" (Rom. 9:23) or the remnant (Rom. 9:27-29; 11:5), those Jews who met the gracious faith-conditions for receiving it as spelled out in Romans 1-8 and 9:30-10:21. Schreiner is seriously wrong when he claims that the election-to-service view of Romans 9 does not address the question of Israel's salvation.<sup>33</sup> The issue with which Paul is dealing is the question of why *all* Israelites are not saved. His answer has nothing to do with a supposed unconditional election to salvation, but with the fact that the promise of salvation was never made to the *nation* in the first place. The whole point of Romans 9 is that one must not equate election to service with election to salvation.

## II. THE STRUCTURE OF ROMANS 9 AND 10

The above interpretation of Romans 9 is clearly borne out by the overall structure of Romans 9 and 10. After posing the problem and his basic answer to it (9:1-6), Paul first discusses unconditional election for service (9:7-18), then conditional election to salvation (9:19-10:21).

### A. Romans 9:7-18

In this first section Paul asserts God's sovereign right to choose and use for service anyone he pleases on his own terms, with no strings attached. He is free to elect individuals or groups to serve his purposes without saving them. The point Paul is establishing in these verses applies to ethnic Israel, not spiritual Israel.

#### 1. Verses 7-13

A common understanding of these verses is that they show how God unconditionally chose to save *some* Israelites but not others.<sup>34</sup> Some Arminians think these verses show that God has made distinctions within Israel. Forlines says they are "designed to get the Jew to come to an understanding of the truth that God did not unconditionally promise eternal life to all who descended from Abraham through Jacob." Just as God distinguished between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau, so "there is no reason to believe that all of the Covenant Seed of Abraham (those who descended from Abraham through Jacob) are saved."<sup>35</sup>

The problem with all such explanations is that they assume that these verses are about how God chooses remnant Israel for salvation and rejects the rest for damnation. They assume that because Paul has identified such a group, as distinct from ethnic Israel as a whole, in Rom. 9:6b, verses 7-13 must be talking about that smaller group and

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<sup>32</sup>See Cottrell, *Romans*, 2:49-59.

<sup>33</sup>Schreiner, "Romans 9," 90-98.

<sup>34</sup>E.g., Baugh says these verses show that "saving grace depends upon predestination ("God's Purpose," 3).

<sup>35</sup>Forlines, *Quest*, 358-359. Picirilli likewise sums up these verses thus: God "never promised, unconditionally, to save all the fleshly descendants of Abraham, Isaac, or Israel" (*Grace*, 71).

how it is set apart from the larger group. My understanding, though, is that verses 7-13 are talking about the larger group itself, i.e., ethnic Israel as a whole, and how it came into being in the first place.

The progression of thought is thus: Not all members of physical Israel are also members of spiritual Israel (9:6b); *neither* are they called the children of Abraham just because they are physically descended from Abraham (9:7a). Thus v. 7 begins a separate thought. The paragraph through v. 13 focuses on the origin and role of ethnic Israel as such, explaining the manner in which God called them into his service. The main point is that this is *different* from the way he calls individuals to salvation. Only when the two are confused do questions about God's faithfulness to Israel arise.

Calvinists are right (contrary to Arminians such as Forlines and Picirilli) that the election described in 9:7-13 is unconditional; they are wrong to assume it is election to salvation rather than election to service. The main reason why Paul cites the "divine distinguishing" between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau, is to emphasize the sovereign, unilateral way in which God established the nation of Israel and enlisted it into his service. Ethnic Israel existed only by God's gracious choice and promise. God alone controls the selection process and the terms of selection. The ones *not* chosen (Ishmael and Esau) are not thereby condemned to hell; they are simply excluded from having a part in the working out of God's redemptive plan.

All of this was done so that "God's purpose in election" (Rom. 9:11, NIV) would not fail, namely, his purpose to bring "the Christ according to the flesh" (Rom. 9:5) into the world. God made it clear from the beginning that he was going to accomplish this purpose through this particular family regardless of their individual decisions and the direction of their personal piety. He showed this in the very way in which he chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, and this is the purpose according to which he chose and dealt with the Israelite nation as a whole. God has faithfully kept his covenant promises to the Jews even though most of them were not saved, because this covenant did not include a promise of personal salvation for all Jews. God's specific purpose for choosing this nation was to use it as a conduit for bringing Christ into the world. From the beginning God determined that he was going to do this, regardless of whether any individual Jews were saved. Just as "God's purpose in election" did not depend upon the spiritual status of the twin he chose from Rebekah's womb, so it did not depend upon the salvation status of the Jews in Paul's day.

The overall main point of this section is God's sovereign freedom to set up his plan of redemption as he chooses. He can choose whomever he pleases, whether individuals or nations, to carry out his redemptive purposes, apart from their own choice or cooperation if necessary. His chosen servants do not have to be a part of spiritual Israel to be of service to him, and he is not obligated to reward them with eternal life just because they have played their part in the messianic drama. There is no inherent connection between service and salvation.

## 2. Verses 14-16

Here Paul explicitly raises the question of God's righteousness or faithfulness and implicitly relates it to his treatment of ethnic Israel as a whole: "What shall we say then? There is no injustice with God, is there? May it never be!" (v. 14). God has the sovereign right to choose for service without an accompanying promise of salvation. But one might ask, how do we know that God has this right? Here is the point of Paul's citation of God's declaration to Moses, "I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion" (Exod. 33:19; see Rom. 9:15). I.e., Paul does not give some logical or rational defense of God's right to choose for service as he pleases; rather, he establishes this right by the simple quoting of the authoritative words of God as recorded in inspired Scripture.

The divine prerogative asserted by God in Exod. 33:19 embraces all the specific cases at issue. No, God has not acted unjustly in his choice of Isaac, in his choice of Jacob, and especially in his choice of the nation of Israel, because Scripture itself records his sovereign right to choose for service anyone he pleases according to his own terms. He has simply acted in accord with his established word.

The common understanding of these two verses (Exod. 33:19 and Rom. 9:15) is that they must refer to salvation because of the terms used: grace, mercy, compassion. This is a crucial issue, and must be dealt with honestly and

carefully. Do the mercy and compassion of 9:15 refer to salvation? I deny that this is the case, and I will support my contention in two steps.

First, the terminology used in these verses does not inherently signify *saving* grace and mercy, in the sense of eternal salvation. I.e., one cannot point to the word "gracious" in Exod. 33:19 and the word "mercy" in Rom. 9:15 and simply assume that they refer to salvation. The fact is that the terms used here often refer to something other than eternal salvation from sin.

The first verb used in Exod. 33:19 is *chanan*, translated "have mercy" (NIV) or "be gracious" (KJV, NASB, NRSV, ESV). It can indeed refer to saving grace (e.g., Ps. 51:1), but this is one of its less frequent meanings. Basically it means "to do someone a favor, to show favor, to be merciful and kind, to bestow a blessing." Sometimes it is used as a preface to a prayer: "Be gracious to me," i.e., "be kind enough to grant my request" (see Ps. 4:1; 27:7).

Examples of how *chanan* is used to refer to temporal blessings include Gen. 33:11, where Jacob says to Esau, "God has dealt graciously with me," i.e., in giving him material wealth. Also, in 2 Sam. 12:22 David says, "The LORD may be gracious to me, that the child may live." I.e., God may grant my request to spare the life of Bathsheba's child. In the Psalms David often prayed for God to "be gracious" to him by giving him the strength to overcome his physical enemies (e.g., Ps. 31:9; 41:10; 56:1).

The noun *chen* is similar. It means "favor, grace, graciousness, a positive and kindly attitude, an inclination to bless." There are multiple examples of this graciousness, both of God and of man. It is mainly used for the idea of finding favor in someone's sight, with no reference to salvation.

The second verb used in Exod. 33:19 is *racham*, translated "show/have compassion" (NASB, NIV), "show/have mercy" (KJV, ESV, NRSV), or "show pity" (TEV). Its cognates are the adjective *rachum*, "compassionate, merciful"; and the noun *rachamim*, "mercies, compassion." These words can refer to the divine compassion that leads to salvation (e.g., Isa. 55:7), but they usually refer to the more general concept of the attitude of compassion, mercy, or pity upon someone in any kind of need.

When used of God's compassion these words usually refer to his temporal blessings upon national Israel, either as bestowed or as withheld. An example of the latter is Jeremiah's warnings that God will not have compassion upon Israel but will deliver them over to their enemies (Jer. 13:14; 21:7). On the other hand, because God is compassionate, he will not destroy his people (Deut. 13:17; Ps. 78:38). A common idea is that because of his compassion God restores his people from captivity. E.g., "Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, 'Now I will restore the fortunes of Jacob and have mercy on the whole house of Israel'" (Ezek 39:25). "I will . . . have compassion on his dwelling places" (Jer. 30:18). See also Deut. 30:3; Isa. 14:1; 49:10, 13; 54:7-8, 10; Jer. 31:20; 33:26; Zech. 10:6.

As in Exod. 33:19, these two words (*chanan* and *racham*) and their cognates are often combined in the Old Testament to describe the nature of God's dealing with his people as a whole, as a nation, as a group. They are the basis for God's decision to bless his people, to spare them, to deliver them, to keep them intact as the people through whom he would work out his plan of redemption. E.g., "the LORD was gracious to them and had compassion on them" and did not allow Syria to destroy them (2 Kings 13:23). Because God is "gracious and compassionate" he will allow the Assyrian captives to return, if they will repent (2 Chron. 30:9). God preserved the nation because he is "a gracious and compassionate God" (Neh. 9:31). "Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you"; i.e., he will spare and bless the nation if it does not seek an alliance with Egypt (Isa. 30:18). See Ps. 102:13, "You will arise and have compassion on Zion; for it is time to be gracious to her."

The point is that in the Old Testament the two main verbs in Exod. 33:19 are very often used to refer to non-soteriological grace or favor, and temporal mercy and compassion.

Paul's quotation from Exod. 33:19 in Rom. 9:15 is taken directly from the Septuagint, which uses the Greek words *eleeo* and *oiktiro*. The latter is used only here in the New Testament; its cognates (adj. *oiktirmon*: Luke 6:36; Jas. 5:11; noun *oiktirmos*: Rom. 12:1; 2 Cor 1:3; Phlp. 2:1; Col. 3:12; Heb. 10:28) appear a little more frequently and refer to compassion or mercy of various kinds, human and divine. *Oiktiro* is very close in meaning to *eleeo*.

The verb *eleeo* ("have mercy, be merciful"; cf. the noun *eleos*, "mercy") is used in Rom. 9:15, as well as in 9:16 and 9:18. It certainly at times refers to God's saving mercy (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:13, 16; 1 Pet. 2:10); it seems to be used in Rom. 9:23 in this sense. But more often it is used in the temporal sense of showing compassion to the poor, sick, or

needy (Rom. 12:8; Phlp. 2:27). Thus it is used as a prelude to a request for such mercy: "Have mercy on me, and help me" (e.g., Matt. 9:27; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30-31; Luke 16:24). Most significantly, it is sometimes used to refer to God's choosing or calling someone for service, specifically, Paul's call to be an apostle: 1 Cor. 7:25; 2 Cor 4:1.<sup>36</sup>

In view of the broad array of meanings for all the words involved here, including many that are not related to salvation, it is simply presumptuous to assume that Paul is using them in Rom. 9:15 to refer to election to salvation. In view of the many uses of the Hebrew terms to refer to God's preservation of Israel as a nation, and Paul's use of *eleeo* to refer to his calling to be an apostle, it is reasonable to interpret the terms here in 9:15 as referring to God's choice of the nation of Israel to play a crucial role in his covenant purposes. The words imply that when God chooses anyone for service, such as Israel, he is bestowing great favor upon that person or nation, whether that person or nation is saved or not.

The second step in establishing that "mercy" and "compassion" in Rom. 9:15 do not refer to saving mercy is to examine the context of the original statement in Exod. 33:19. All we have done so far is to show that the words do not necessarily refer to saving mercy, since they have other legitimate uses compatible with election to service. But how do we know that the latter is the connotation intended here? The only way to decide this is to analyze them in reference to their contexts, especially in Exodus. The bottom line is that, when God says in Exod. 33:19 that he will be gracious to and show compassion upon whomever he chooses, he is declaring *his right to do as he chooses with the nation of Israel*. In this case he is exercising this right by sovereignly choosing to spare them as a nation and to continue using them in his redemptive plan. There is no reference at all to individual salvation, temporal or eternal.

The setting of this remark begins in Exod. 32:9-10, where God declares that because of their sin of idolatry while Moses was on Mt. Sinai, he will simply destroy them all and make a new nation out of Moses. Moses himself intercedes for the people (32:11-13), and God relents and says he will not destroy them after all (32:14). But, even though he will permit them to continue to be his people and to go on to the promised land, God is still very angry with them and declares that he will not show his presence among them: "Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, and I might destroy you on the way" (33:3; see 32:30-35). I.e., he will not appear to the people in the form of the pillar of cloud, and he will not speak to Moses face to face (33:7-11). The people became extremely distressed at this prospect (33:4-6).

Moses' request to God in 33:18 ("I pray You, show me Your glory!") is in view of God's threat to withdraw his visible presence from them. Moses asks: How will we know that we are still your people, if your presence is not visible among us? How will we be different from any other nation? Please reconsider! (33:12-16). God heard Moses' prayer, and consented to answer it: "I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight" (33:17). Then Moses presumptuously asks, Reassure me! "Show me Your glory!" (33:18).

What follows is God's response to all of this. First, he says, I will be gracious to you, Moses, and grant your request; but remember this: I am free to grant such grace and mercy to whomever I please! Then he does answer Moses' prayer, with a marvelous theophany (33:19-34:8). Then Moses says, Okay, you have blessed *me*; now assure me that you will still be present in the midst of the *people* (34:9). To this request God also gave a positive reply, in effect saying, I will be gracious to them and spare them and continue to use them and do marvelous works in their midst (34:10ff.).

Thus the original context of this statement shows that God's mercy and compassion in Exod. 33:19 have nothing to do with choosing anyone for salvation.<sup>37</sup> They refer to the mercy shown to Moses in the answering of his prayer,

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<sup>36</sup>The Greek word *charis*, "grace," means "a gift that brings joy" and is the main NT word for saving grace. However, it also is often used of gifts of service, or gifts that enable individuals to serve God in special ways (see 1 Pet. 4:10-11). The apostleship was such a gift (1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:7, 11; Rom. 12:3, 6), and Paul refers to his call to be an apostle as an act of God's grace: Rom. 1:5; 15:15-16; 1 Cor. 3:10; 15:10; Gal. 1:15; 2:9; Eph. 3:7-8. This shows that the terminology of grace applies to the call to service and not just to salvation.

<sup>37</sup>There is simply no basis for Picirilli's statement that Paul's "use of Exodus 33:19 specifically supports the point that not all Israelites were destined to be saved" (*Grace*, 72).

and the mercy shown to the nation of Israel in the decision to continue using and blessing them as his covenant people.<sup>38</sup> The latter application is the very point Paul is making by citing this statement in Rom. 9:15. I.e., it is a matter of God's sovereign mercy that he has chosen this nation for his purposes in the first place, and certainly even more so that he has spared and preserved them even this long, allowing them finally to be the physical source of the Savior's presence in the world (Rom. 9:5).

Romans 9:16 does, I think, express the concept of unconditional election; but Paul is applying it only to election for service and not to election for salvation.

### 3. Verses 17-18

We come now to the reference to Pharaoh. How does this fit into the progression of Paul's argument? The apostle has shown that God's treatment of the Jews is not unjust because he has complete sovereignty in the way he chooses those who will serve his purposes. The way he chose Isaac and Jacob demonstrates this by example, and this is further confirmed by the citation of the general principle from Exod. 33:19. All of this together shows that God is free to choose whomever he pleases for roles of service.

But this in itself does not fully address the issue of the Jews. The question specifically is whether God is unjust because he called the nation of Israel into his service while at the same time condemning many if not most individual Jews to hell. If God is going to use them, is he not thereby obligated to save them? This is the point addressed in verses 17-18. Here Paul shows from the Old Testament that God's sovereignty in election for service includes the prerogative of choosing and using someone without saving them. His premiere example is Pharaoh. Not only was he chosen via God's sovereign mercy, but he was also hardened or confirmed in his unbelief.

As noted in the beginning, it is common to take v. 18 as referring to election to salvation and rejection to hell, with the former applying to Moses and the latter to Pharaoh. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the first place, there is nothing in this verse about eternal destinies, either heaven or hell.<sup>39</sup> "Mercy" here means the same as the mercy and compassion of v. 15, i.e., the favor God shows when he bestows on someone the privilege of playing a role in the drama of redemption. Second, there is no reference to Moses in this verse at all. Forster and Marston are right to say that in this text "no one's eternal destiny is in question," but they are wrong to say that in 9:14-18 Paul holds up the "two key (and representative) figures of Moses and Pharaoh," comparing them and drawing lessons from them about Israel.<sup>40</sup> This misses the point of v. 18. Paul has said nothing specifically about Moses in this passage except that God revealed to him the great principle in Rom. 9:15. At most that principle applied to him in context in the sense that God chose to answer his prayer. But he is not set forth here as Pharaoh's counterpart, as the object of God's mercy in contrast with Pharaoh as the object of God's hardening.

Rather, the whole of verse 18 refers to Pharaoh. In this context Paul has deliberately chosen to introduce him as an example because he is a perfect paradigm for God's treatment of Israel as one chosen for significant service in God's redemptive plan. In this sense God "had mercy" on Pharaoh, just as he had mercy on Israel by choosing Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the entire nation to fulfill his covenant purposes. But God not only exercised his sovereign right to raise Pharaoh up for a specific purpose (v. 17); he also chose to use him for this purpose without saving him. In this sense Pharaoh is exactly parallel with Israel regarding the key point of this whole chapter: God's right to choose for service without also choosing for salvation.

No one will dispute the application of v. 18b to Pharaoh, and no one will seriously question his lost state as an unbelieving idolater. His opposition to God is dramatically emphasized with the reference to the hardening of his heart: "He hardens whom He desires." This does not mean that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in such a way that he

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<sup>38</sup>See Forster and Marston, *God's Strategy*, 65-66.

<sup>39</sup>Contra Calvinism in general, and contra Arminians such as Forlines, who declares, "Mercy in this context refers to the bestowal of salvation" (*Quest*, 370).

<sup>40</sup>Forster and Marston, *God's Strategy*, 66-67, 75, 169.

was thereby caused to be an unbeliever; the Old Testament account of the events preceding the exodus from Egypt make it clear that Pharaoh had already hardened his own heart against God. The main senses in which God hardened his heart were in extending or protracting Pharaoh's own self-caused hardness, and in focusing it upon a particular situation. By doing this God thus caused Pharaoh to prolong his ultimate and inevitable decision to let the people go until all the plagues could be inflicted (cf. Exod. 4:21; 7:3; Rom. 9:17). In this way God used Pharaoh both in spite of his lost state and because of his lost state, but without in any way causing his lost state.

Thus I affirm that both clauses in Rom. 9:18 refer to Pharaoh, first to God's granting him the favor of choosing him for service, and second to God's harnessing and manipulating his lost state (his sin-hardened heart) to accomplish the specific purpose for which God chose him in the first place. I also affirm that this is the exact pattern of God's dealings with ethnic Israel as a whole. In his mercy he chose them for service, and he used them for his purpose both in spite of the fact that many (most) of them were lost and even *because* they were lost. As in the case with Pharaoh, the Jews who had hardened their own hearts toward God were in turn hardened by God early in the New Covenant era in such a way that God accomplished a specific purpose through that very hardness.

The bottom line is that God's treatment of Israel is perfectly fair and just. He unconditionally chose and used them for his purposes, but this does not mean that they thereby had any claim on God's saving grace. They were both *chosen* and *hardened* at the same time.<sup>41</sup> Thus there is no inherent connection between service and salvation, as the example of Pharaoh shows.

#### B. Romans 9:19-10:21

In this section Paul finally turns to the subject of salvation, as he discusses what distinguishes the saved remnant within Israel from the unsaved Jews. Here it is clear that God's choice of the remnant is conditional, in accordance with the already-established principle of justification by faith.

##### 1. Verses 19-29

In the preceding verses (7-18) the subject of Paul's discussion was the nation of Israel as a whole, the larger Israel of Rom. 9:6b. He asserted God's right to use them as a nation, whether they were saved or not. And he did so use them, to fulfill the grand covenant purpose of preparing for the incarnation of the Messiah. The scope of God's promises to ethnic Israel were limited to this purpose; and since God kept all these promises (9:4-5), he is completely righteous and faithful in his dealings with the Jews.

But what about salvation? Is God not the God of salvation? Has he not also promised salvation to his people? Yes, but not as a part of the Abrahamic covenant as such, and not as a part of his overall covenant purposes for national Israel. In Rom. 9:6b Paul indicated that within this larger group there is a smaller group, a spiritual or remnant Israel. This is the group that receives and experiences the saving grace of God. This group is the subject of these present verses (19-29).

Though it is not specifically stated in 9:6b, the existence of a saved remnant within Israel implies that the rest of the nation was lost. In this paragraph (verses 19-29) Paul is clearly affirming that within the larger body there are actually two smaller bodies: the saved and the unsaved. And here, eternal destinies are definitely in view. The lump of clay (9:21) refers to the nation of Israel as such, and not to the human race as a whole. From this one lump come "vessels of wrath" and "vessels of mercy" (9:22-23). The ways these vessels come into existence are different. In v. 22 the "vessels of wrath" are indeed the objects of God's wrath, but God himself did not make them this way. The verb "prepared" is either passive or (more likely) middle voice, meaning that they *prepared themselves* for destruction. They are thus responsible for their own destruction, by their sin and unbelief and refusal to repent. And even though God wanted to destroy them because of this (see Exodus 32-33 again), nevertheless he patiently endured (put up with) their wrath-deserving unbelief for the very purpose of making it possible to have "vessels of mercy" (v. 23) through the carrying out of his redemptive plan. These vessels of mercy (which God himself prepared, v. 23) include not only the

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<sup>41</sup>On the hardening of the Jews see Rom. 11:7-11 and the explanation thereof in Cottrell, *Romans*, 2:218-231.

believing Jews, but in the New Covenant era the believing Gentiles as well (v. 24), who together now comprise the Church. The existence of this saved remnant was clearly prophesied in the Old Testament (verses 25-29).

We must not lose sight of Paul's main point, which is to declare God's faithfulness in his dealings with the Jews. As he has insisted all along, the members of ethnic Israel did not have to be personal believers as a prerequisite for being used to carry out the divine plan. Even as vessels of wrath, they were used collectively as an instrument for carrying out God's ultimate saving purpose, which was to bring Christ into the world and through him the church itself as the final form of the spiritual Israel.

## 2. 9:30-10:21

In 9:19-29 Paul shows that God has separated spiritual Israel from the unsaved portion of Israel; in this final section he explains *how* this separation is effected. The message of chapters 1-8 comes back into view: acceptance by God comes not through works but through faith in Jesus Christ. Here there is no hint of unconditional election to salvation or damnation; rather, it is clear that the separation between the lost and the saved Israelites is the result of their own choices, either to believe or to disbelieve. The Jews who were lost had no one to blame but themselves and their own stubborn wills. God himself is pictured, not as sovereignly deciding in his own secret will who will be saved and who will be lost, but as a loving God who invites all to be saved: "But as for Israel He says, 'ALL THE DAY LONG I HAVE STRETCHED OUT MY HANDS TO A DISOBEDIENT AND OBSTINATE PEOPLE'" (10:21).

This is how this main section ends. Is Israel's lost state a reflection on God, evidence of his unfaithfulness, an indication that his word has failed (9:6)? No, God has faithfully kept his word to Israel in every way. He kept every promise he made to the nation relating to their covenant purposes and privileges (9:1-29). He has sent the Messiah and given them every opportunity to trust in him for personal salvation (9:30-10:21). Their refusal to accept him is their own fault.

Calvinists and others who take Romans 9 as teaching the sovereign, unconditional election of individuals to salvation find it difficult to reconcile this with the emphasis on Israel's willful unbelief in Romans 10. Stott's view is typical:<sup>42</sup>

So Paul concludes his second exploration into the unbelief of Israel. In chapter 9 he attributed it to God's purpose of election, on account of which many were passed by, and only a remnant was left, an Israel within Israel. In chapter 10, however, he attributes it to Israel's own disobedience. Their fall was their fault. The antinomy between divine sovereignty and human responsibility remains.

Morris likewise calls attention to the sharp contrast between the "predestinarian" understanding of ch. 9 and the emphasis in ch. 10 on "Israel's responsibility." He concludes, "If we are to understand what Paul is saying in Romans we must hold both truths at the same time, no matter how hard we find it to reconcile them to one another."<sup>43</sup>

This "antinomy" disappears, however, when we rightly see Romans 9 as discussing the unconditional election of Israel as a nation to a role of service, and Romans 10 as an explanation of the conditional manner in which individual Jews are either saved or lost. There is no conflict between these chapters because they are discussing two different things, with the vindication of God's faithfulness being the main point in each case.

[NOTE: This paper can be accessed at the following internet site: [ETS@zondervan.com](mailto:ETS@zondervan.com) .]

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<sup>42</sup>John Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 289-290.

<sup>43</sup>Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 395.