

Calvin's Five-Point Misunderstanding of Romans 9: An Intertextual Analysis
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Introduction

In his *Institutes*, while explaining how God graciously saves humanity, John Calvin's main goal is to assert that God saves people entirely out of his own mercy and grace, and that the elect have no basis for boasting about their own works. In asserting that God's sovereign grace alone is the reason for election, he is logically compelled to admit that God's sovereignty is also the sole basis for reprobation. Of course Calvin finds this idea distasteful and calls the decree by which God dooms some individuals to eternal punishment "dreadful" (*horribile*).¹ Calvin does not propose this doctrine because he likes it, but because he believes Scripture clearly teaches it. He devotes chapter twenty-one of book three of the *Institutes* to explaining the doctrine of election, asserting that God has predestined some people to salvation and others to destruction. He then defends the idea in the next two chapters. In these chapters he refers to many scripture portions, but the gravamen of his argument is carried by Romans 9. He also discusses the idea of predestination in his commentaries, especially those on Romans and Exodus; once again Romans 9 and the passages it quotes from Exodus are central to the discussion.² Calvin's understanding of this chapter is at variance with that of almost every writer in the early church with the exception of the later Augustine.³ Though Calvin's view was shared by Luther, it was opposed by Erasmus in his own day.⁴ Writers since the Reformation also disputed his interpretation.⁵ In the twentieth century Karl Barth quoted Calvin's words but said they were only true

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 3.23.7, p. 955. In this passage Calvin refers specifically to God's decree that Adam's fall irremediably involved so many adults, together with their infant offspring, in eternal death. It seems clear, however, that Calvin has the larger idea of reprobation in mind when he uses this adjective.

²John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, C. W. Bingham, trans. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1950), and John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians*, Ross Mackenzie, trans., D. W. and T. F. Torrence, eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1960).

³Origen, Apollinaris of Laodicea, John Chrysostom, Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus, Cyril of Alexandria, Jerome, and Ambrosiaster all believe Romans 9 does not teach absolute divine determinism, and Erasmus followed them in their interpretation. See Maurice F. Wiles, *The Divine Apostle. The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), Martin Parmentier, "Greek Church Fathers on Romans 9, part 2," *Bijdragen tijdschrift voor filosofie en theologie* 51 (1990), pp. 10-15. The obvious exception to the wholesale rejection of divine determinism is the later Augustine. In his first exposition of this chapter Augustine explained the election of Jacob and not of Esau by saying God acted because of "the hidden merits" of Jacob, and in his second he said God chose Jacob on the basis of his foreseen faith. It is only in his final explanation that Augustine adopts the position later advocated by Calvin, that God elects for no reason outside his own will. See W. S. Babcock, "Augustine and Paul: the case of Romans IX" *Studia Patristica* 16/2 (1985), pp. 473-479.

⁴See E. Gordon Rupp and Philip S. Watson, eds., *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation* [LCC] (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), and John B. Payne, "Erasmus on Romans 9:6-24" in David C. Steinmetz, ed., *The Bible in the Sixteenth Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 119-135.

⁵James Arminius treats Romans 9 without direct reference to Calvin, arguing that Jacob and Esau are types for believers and non-believers respectively. See James Arminius, "Analysis to the Ninth Chapter of Romans," in *The Writings of James Arminius*, James Nichols and W. R. Bagnall, trans. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 3:527-565. John Wesley argues that individual predestination contradicts dozens of other scriptures and says that the election spoken of in Romans 9 is God's choice to save those who believe and to damn those who do not. See John Wesley, "Predestination Calmly Considered," *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872, reprinted Grand Rapids: Baker Book House

“mythologically.”⁶ More recently, the scholarly world has largely abandoned Calvin’s understanding, with three of today’s most widely-respected commentators rejecting some or all of his views.⁷ Lately, intertextual analysis has given us new tools to evaluate his conclusions.⁸ When assessed by these tools we find that Calvin’s understanding of Romans 9 is marred by five different mistakes.

Calvin’s five different mistakes follow his exposition of Romans 9:6-24. First, from vv. 6-13 Calvin concludes that both Ishmael and Esau are damned; second, from vv. 14-15 he finds that God’s essential nature is arbitrary; third, from vv. 16-18 Calvin reasons that God completely controlled Pharaoh and made him disobey the Lord’s commands; fourth, based on vv. 19-20 Calvin asserts that no one can hold God’s saving or damning actions to an objective standard of justice; and fifth, Calvin believes vv. 21-24 teach that God creates some people for the express purpose of damning them. None of these concepts is actually taught in Romans 9. Calvin only finds them there due to a variety of exegetical errors which he makes because misunderstands Paul’s intertextual use of the Old Testament.

Assessing Calvin’s exegesis in the light of intertextual analysis discloses that Calvin misunderstood Paul’s use of the Old Testament according to four of Hay’s seven proposed tests. Calvin begins well, passing the first

Company, 1979), 10:204-59. For a modern restatement of this line of argument see Roger T. Foster and V. Paul Marston, *God’s Strategy in Human History* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1973). The outstanding modern defense of Calvin’s position is John Piper’s *The Justification of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992). Obviously it is not possible to respond to every point of Piper’s book in one article, but this paper will cover the all the main issues he raises and argue that conclusions directly opposite from his are warranted. More recently Thomas R. Schreiner has defended the Calvinist reading of Romans 9 arguing Paul is talking about the salvation of individuals in these verses. I believe intertextual analysis, discussed below, will point out the errors in his essay. See Thomas H. Schriener, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation? Some Exegetical and Theological Reflections,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36/1 (March 1993) pp. 25-40.

⁶Barth says “When the Reformers applied the doctrine of election and rejection (Predestination) to the psychological unity of this or that individual, and when they referred quantitatively to the ‘elect’ and the ‘damned,’ they were, as we can now see, speaking mythologically.” He quotes Calvin in this section on pp. 349, 350, and 356. See Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 6th ed., Edwyn C. Hoskyns, trans. (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 340-361.

⁷As noted below Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* [ICC] (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), and James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* [Word Bible Commentary] (Dallas: Word Books, 1988) differ with Calvin on important points. Douglas Moo agrees with Calvin’s exegesis, but as Gordon Fee points out in his editor’s preface this view of Romans is “not notably popular among Romans specialists these days.” See Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [NIC] (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), p. vii.

⁸Intertextual analysis is discussed in Richard B. Hays, *Echos of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989). There he gives seven tests for any proposed understanding of Paul’s use of the Hebrew Bible: Availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, the history of interpretation, and satisfaction. As Hayes himself admits “To run explicitly through this series of criteria for each of the texts I will treat would be wearisome,” but his tests will shape my handling of Paul’s use of the Scripture in Romans 9. For an explanation of the tests and the quotation, see pp. 29-32 of Hays’s work. I will analyze each passage by the appropriate intertextual criteria, and then conclude by applying the suitable tests to Calvin’s overall interpretation of Romans 9.

Intertextual analysis is especially germane to this passage if it does indeed partake more of midrash than of diatribe as Stegner argues. If Paul is engaging in a form of scripture interpretation that flourished during the first six centuries of the common era in Jewish communities, it is especially important to understand the way he handles the Old Testament. See William Richard Stegner, “Romans 9:6-29—A Midrash” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 22 (1984), pp. 37-52.

three tests of intertextual analysis. The first test is availability: for Paul and his readers Scripture was Scripture, whether cited in the Hebrew or Septuagint, so the authority of the cited texts is clear. Of course Calvin would have no problem with this test. Second is volume: because Paul quotes these texts, there is no question, for Calvin or anyone else, which texts he is citing. Third is recurrence: in Romans and his other epistles Paul refers to the Abraham cycle, to the experience of the Exodus, and he quotes Isaiah, showing how important these scriptures are in Paul's understanding of God's plan. Once again, Calvin is like Paul, as he values these sections highly. Having begun well, it is only as Calvin comes to the latter four tests that he begins to stumble.

Verses 6-9 Is Ishmael Damned?

In Calvin's handling of the texts about Abraham's sons and in the texts about Isaac's sons Calvin fails the test of historical plausibility. The meanings Calvin proposes for the passages cited in these verses run directly counter to the teaching about these people in the rest of the Old Testament. Primary in Calvin's misinterpretation of vv. 6-9 and 10-13 is his falling into the fallacy of equivocation, of treating the concept of election as if it referred only to the eternal destiny of an individual, and thus concluding that both Ishmael and Esau are damned.⁹ Calvin knows the word "election" has more than one meaning. In *The Institutes* 3.21.5 he speaks of God's election of "the whole offspring of Abraham," the nation of Israel.¹⁰ Here the term refers to the special treatment God gave to the Hebrew nation. Calvin lists some of those benefits of this first kind of election: God delivered them from Egypt, he protected them, he adorned them with gifts, he accorded them high honor, he was favorably inclined toward them, he provided all the good things in which they abounded, he gave them the promised land, and he offered them salvation.¹¹ After describing this first kind of election, Calvin speaks of "a second, more limited decree of election," by which God chooses individuals to be either saved or damned: "As Scripture, then, clearly shows, we say that God once established by his eternal and unchangeable plan those whom he long before determined once for all to receive into salvation and those whom, on the other hand, he would devote to destruction."¹² Having once established that election can have two different meanings, Calvin treats the appearance of the concept in Romans 9 as if it clearly has the second meaning, indicating God's choice of individuals for salvation or damnation. From Paul's teaching that Isaac was the son of promise (Romans 9:7-9) and that God chose Jacob (Romans 9:10-13), Calvin concludes that both Ishmael and Esau are damned. He says that Ishmael and Esau are "cut off" from the "spiritual covenant" of salvation and adds that Jacob's election implies Esau's reprobation.¹³

Calvin's assumption that God's undisputed passing over of each of these elder brothers in favor of the younger means that the former were damned is belied both by Romans 9 and by the rest of Scripture. In Romans 9 Paul does not say that either Ishmael or Esau is damned. In fact, when discussing how Isaac is the son of promise he never names Ishmael or any of Abraham's six other sons. Paul does name Esau and even says that he is hated, but he does not explicitly say anything about his eternal state. Paul's concern is to show that Isaac and Jacob are elected by God. He makes his point directly by discussing the promises made to these two men and by implication when he neglects to mention God's promises to Abraham's or Isaac's other children. If election unequivocally means selection for individual salvation, then Calvin is right to conclude that non-election is reprobation, but, as he himself explains, election can have a different meaning. That this different meaning obtains in Romans 9 is shown by the treatment of these men in other parts of the Scripture.

⁹Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.16.14, p. 1336.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 3.21.5, p. 927. Calvin does not really mean the whole offspring of Abraham, but only those descended from him through Jacob.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 3.21.5-7, pp. 927-30.

¹²*Ibid.*, 3.23.7, pp. 929, 931.

¹³*Ibid.*, 3.21.6, p. 929 and 3.22.4, p. 936.

Although Paul calls Isaac the seed of promise, other parts of the Bible show that Ishmael also shares in God's promises and blessing. Ishmael is mentioned at least eight times in the Old Testament and is often blessed by God. In Genesis 16:10 God promises, "I will so increase your descendants so that they will be too numerous to count." God goes on in verse 12 to state that Ishmael will be "a wild donkey of a man" and "will live in hostility toward all his brothers." These words, however, do not indicate God's disfavor with Ishmael, for he is included in the covenant with Abraham by circumcision (Genesis 17:23) and God promises to bless him: "I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers and I will make him into a great nation." (Genesis 17:20) This promise is reiterated in Genesis 21:13 and 18, and is partially fulfilled as Genesis 21:20 tells us that God was with the boy as he grew up. More of the promise comes true as Genesis 25:13 tells us that Ishmael's twelve sons become the heads of twelve tribes and finally Isaiah 60:7 prophesies that the flocks of Ishmael's sons will serve Israel and be accepted on God's altar. Nothing in the Old Testament indicates that God punished Ishmael in this life or that he damned him for the future life. True, he is not elected to possess the land or to be the source of blessing for the whole world as is Isaac, but to be passed over for a role in heilsgeschichte is very different from being punished in hell forever.¹⁴

Verses 10-13 Is Esau Damned?

Like Ishmael, Esau too is not selected by God to be a channel for his blessing to the world, but nothing in Scripture indicates that he personally is reprobate as Calvin states.¹⁵ Once again Calvin fails the intertextual test of historical plausibility. The Bible is clear that God chooses Jacob to be served by Esau (Genesis 25:23), and tells how Jacob treacherously obtained both the birthright and the blessing. After recording events from the lives of both of Isaac's sons, the lasting impression Scripture gives in its treatment of Esau is how rich and significant he is: Genesis 32:6 reveals that Esau leads four hundred men and Genesis 36:7 describes the abundance of possessions he acquires; the chapter then goes on to record the names of his numerous descendants. Esau's name is mentioned again in Malachi 1:3, and Paul quotes this passage to make his point. Unhappily, Paul's point is obscured by two problems. The first is, when Paul says "Esau" does he mean the historical individual or the nation that comes from him? The second is, when Paul says "hate" does he mean active malice or merely less love? The answer to the first question comes from the contexts of Malachi and Romans. In Malachi it is clear that the prophet is using Esau figuratively to refer to the nation of Edom and not to the historical individual who is Jacob's brother. From the context of Romans we see, however, that Paul is taking Malachi's synecdoche and applying it to the historical individual who fathered the nation to which the prophet refers. The second and more troubling problem comes, however, in Paul's application of the word "hate" to God's feeling for Esau. Unfortunately for readers not familiar with biblical languages, the Hebrew word Malachi uses אָנִי, *sane*, and the Greek word Paul quotes from the LXX, μισέω, *miseo* are both often translated as "hate," implying active malice toward an individual. The words can certainly have this import, but nothing in the word's meaning or the context of Malachi requires this idea. Hebrew can use אָנִי to indicate not malice, but only less love, as it does in Genesis 29:31 when Jacob loves Leah less than Rachel. Likewise the Greek word has a similar meaning: in Luke 14:26 Jesus tells his disciples to hate their parents, while the parallel passage in Matthew 10:37 reveals that they are to love them less than they do Jesus. Thus in its context Malachi's words do not apply at all to the historical individual named Esau. Irenaeus pointed out this fact as early as the second century when he said the prophet's words meant that Israel would be a great, free nation while Edom would be a lesser people living in bondage.¹⁶ Moreover, Paul's application of

¹⁴Cranfield understands the passage in this way. He says that though the roles Ishmael and Isaac play "are so sharply contrasted" both "stand within—and not without—the embrace of the divine mercy." See C. E. B. Cranfield, 472.

¹⁵ *Institutes*, 3.22.4, p. 936.

¹⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.21.2 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979) 1:493. Others in modern days have made a similar point. See Cranfield, p. 480.

Malachi's words may mean only that God's regard for Jacob was greater than his disposition toward Esau, that God chose Jacob, not Esau, to be the channel for blessing. Obviously Calvin was familiar with the biblical idiom, but he seems to overlook this nuance when reading Romans 9. Although he knows that Malachi's words do not denote that God hated Esau as a person, still in both the *Institutes* and his *Commentary on Romans* he maintains that Paul quotes this verse to assert that Esau is damned.¹⁷ Read with the remembrance of the Lord's benefits to Esau in terms of his property and descendants, it becomes clear Paul does not intend to claim that Esau is reprobate, but only to assert that God elects Jacob, not his elder brother, for a role in heilsgeschichte¹⁸. Thus while the rest of the Scripture clearly supports Paul's teaching that neither Ishmael nor Esau is elected to bring God's blessing to the world, it does not sustain Calvin's contention that because these men are not elected, both of them are damned to eternal punishment.¹⁹

Verses 14-15 Is God Essentially Arbitrary?

Intertextual analysis not only shows that Calvin assigned meanings to Old Testament texts that are historically implausible because they contradict the rest of the Old Testament's teaching on the subjects, it also shows that Calvin's reading of the text sometimes violates its thematic coherence. In vv. 14-15 Calvin makes the mistake on two levels: he misconstrues the meaning of Exodus 33:19 in its own context, and his interpretation of the text makes nonsense of the argument Paul is trying to make. Calvin goes wrong when he argues that Romans 9:15, which quotes Exodus 33:19, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion," is an assertion of God's right to save some and damn others "as it so pleases him."²⁰ Repeatedly Calvin has recourse to this text to argue that God chooses to show mercy only to a few, and "not to bestow it upon all."²¹ This assertion of God's arbitrary nature grievously misreads the text. He begins to go wrong when he misunderstands the Hebrew idiom God uses in Exodus. Next this misreading of the idiom forces him to ignore the context in which the quoted words originally appear disrupting its thematic coherence, and finally, ruining the coherence of Paul's argument.

In answer to his rhetorical question, "God is not unrighteous, is he?" (Romans 9:14), Paul uses his strongest negation and then cites God's words to Moses from Exodus 33:19. The Hebrew idiom God uses in this verse

¹⁷*Institutes*, 3.21.7, p. 930 shows Calvin knew this passage applied primarily to nations, as does his *Romans*, p. 202, but in both places he states that Esau is damned.

¹⁸Morris says the stress of this passage is election for service. "God chose Israel for this role; he did not choose Edom." See Morris, p. 357. Dunn says that the idea of reprobation can be "drawn out [of this verse] at best (if at all) with hesitancy and many a question mark." See Dunn, p. 545.

¹⁹One other passage mentions Esau as a person and not as the eponymous name for Edom: Hebrews 12:16-17. There it calls him "godless" and conflates his sale of his birthright and his seeking of his stolen blessing. Some argue that this passage proves that Esau was reprobate. Laying aside the argument that it is improper to interpret Paul through Hebrews, we should note that the passage does reveal that when Esau sold his birthright he not only did not value it (as Genesis 25:34 comments), but he also did not value the God who stood behind that birthright. It is, however, different to adjudge that someone is godless at one point in his life, and to pronounce that he is eternally damned. Knowing the rest of the Esau story, how he realized his mistake in marrying the Hittite women (Genesis 28:6-9), and how he did not carry out his threat to kill Jacob (Genesis 33), is it impossible to hope he likewise repented of his godlessness? Moreover, in the same breath that the writer of Hebrews warns the readers not to be godless like Esau, he also tells them not to be sexually immoral. No one would argue that one episode of sexual immorality is a sure sign of reprobation, so no one should conclude from one episode of "godlessness" that Esau is damned.

²⁰*Institutes*, 3.22.6, p. 939.

²¹*Ibid.*, 3.24.16, p. 984. In arguing that God freely chooses to save some and not all, Calvin sometimes emphasizes God's choice and sometimes emphasizes the limited number chosen. In 2.5.17, p. 337, 3.22.6, p. 938, and 3.2.28, p. 942, he stresses God's choice while in 3.22.6 p. 939 he highlights the "small number" of those who are saved.

employs repetition for emphasis. The question is, What is being emphasized? Does God wish to assert his right to limit his mercy or does he want to underscore how widely it extends? The Hebrew idiom, technically called paronomasia or *idem per idem*, often appears with the infinitive absolute as in Gen 2:17, which literally says "to die, you shall die" and means "you shall surely die." In this form the idiom simply implies intensification and, if used in Exodus 33, would emphasize the extent of God's mercy and compassion. Other times, however, Hebrew uses paronomasia with a relative clause as in Ex 4:13, where Moses tells God "send by the hand you will send." In this case, some interpreters find a different nuance. They say the Exodus 4 passage emphasizes not so much the action of sending, but the indeterminacy of the one sent or the freedom and power of the sender.²² Since the relative absolute is the form used in Exodus 33, some say the purpose of the idiom here is to emphasize God's right to limit his mercy.²³ It is true that the form of paronomasia God uses in Ex 33:19 does contain an element of indeterminacy, but it is not true that the goal is to stress God's freedom to limit his mercy. Rather, by using repetition with the relative clause, God is affirming his freedom to show grace along with its limitless extent. He says that his very character is lovingkindness and that no one can or needs to constrain his mercy and compassion, because they flow from his essence. In addition, no one can determine the limit of its reach because he freely chooses to bestow it. The targumim understand this idiom in this way as do the majority of the rabbis who comment on this text.²⁴ Calvin misses the idiom and reads the words literally, understanding them to affirm that of all the people to whom God could show grace, the Lord arbitrarily chooses some and passes by others.²⁵ Thus to Calvin this phrase connotes a limitation of God's mercy and compassion, rather than an emphasis on them.²⁶ When seen as a paronomasia, however, the phrase, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" becomes an expression not of circumscription, but of bounty, accenting God's power and freedom to be gracious.

That "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" is an idiom which intensifies rather than limits is clear from the context in which God utters this phrase. In Exodus 33 Moses feels overwhelmed by the task the Lord has assigned him. He seeks reassurance, asking God to be present with the people. This God promises because he is pleased with Moses and knows him intimately. God uses a Hebrew idiom to express the depth of his knowledge of Moses when he says in v. 17, "I know you by name." Moses desires a deeper, more reciprocal relationship with the Lord, so he pleads, "Now show me your glory." Responding positively to this request, God promises he will allow Moses to see his goodness and to fully understand his character. When God says, "I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence" he is using the Hebrew idiom, "name" to represent his whole character. He tells Moses that he will give him a deep and intimate knowledge of his personality. In this context the phrase "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion" is linked with God's goodness and his essential character. God

²²T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, trans. Paul Jouen, *Subsidia Biblica* 14/II (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991) vol 2, p. 599, para. 158o. I am indebted to Allen Emery of Hendrickson Press for calling this resource to my attention.

²³Joining Calvin in his understanding that in this passage God asserts his right to limit his mercy is Piper. See Piper, pp. 81-83.

²⁴Cornelis Houtman, *A Historical Commentary on the Old Testament: Exodus* (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 3:701-2, and Samuel ben Meir, *Rashbam's Commentary on Exodus: An Annotated Translation*, ed. and trans. Martin I. Lockshin (Providence: Brown Judaic Studies, 1997) p. 414. For a modern Jewish understanding see Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), p. 214, which translates the phrase, "the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show."

²⁵Calvin says God uses this phrase to show his arbitrary power. See his *Commentary ... Moses*, p. 381.

²⁶He says, "The relative pronoun expressly denotes that mercy will not be extended indiscriminately to all." *Romans*, pp. 204-5.

is saying that he freely bestows his mercy and compassion, that no one forces him to do so, that when he acts graciously he is expressing his fundamental nature.²⁷

Calvin does not understand God's words in this way. He says that with these words "God restrains Moses' intercession."²⁸ This comment is puzzling in two ways. It strangely finds intercession as something that needs to be restrained, and it conflates two episodes that are separated in time. Earlier, in Exodus 32 after the incident with the golden calf, Moses intercedes with the Lord. Obviously God is pleased with Moses' words because he grants the request and relents of his punishment. The next day Moses again intercedes for the people, and even says he does not want to live if they do not, "Please forgive their sin, but if not then blot me out of the book you have written." (Ex 32:32) God answers that he will not be blackmailed by Moses, but will punish those who have sinned against him. Despite not granting Moses' request, the Lord does not rebuke Moses for pleading their case. He does not forbid him to pray for the people as he later did with Jeremiah (Jer 7:16). This incident ends when the Lord carries out his threat and punishes the people with a plague. After the passage of some time, God again speaks to Moses and tells him it is time to get moving toward the promised land (Ex 33). In response to this command, Moses seeks the Lord more deeply, and is rewarded with a fuller revelation of his character. This incident is the context of the phrase "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." Perhaps referring to their last conversation, God declares it to remind Moses that God's quintessence is grace, that he freely bestows mercy and compassion, and that Moses has no need to try to force him to forgive his people. Nowhere in this incident does the issue of intercession arise; far less is there a rebuke for too much intercession. Apparently Calvin's inability to see the idiom leads him into these additional mistakes in an attempt to make sense of the passage.

Understanding the phrase from Exodus as an intensifier rather than a limiter not only makes better sense of what God says to Moses in Ex 33:19, it also makes better sense of Paul's argument when he quotes the sentence in Rom 9:15. Calvin thinks that Paul's citation of Rom 9:15 claims God's right to do as he pleases in saving some and damning others, but this reading of the text demolishes the intent of Paul's argument at this point. Paul quotes Ex 33:19 in answer to the charge that God is unjust in his election of Jacob over Esau. If Calvin is right in understanding this verse to present God's sovereign power to do as he pleases, Paul's answer to the objection loses all its force. It completely misses the point. The objection is not questioning God's power, but it is raising the issue of God's justice. The point is: If God uses his power to save Jacob and damn Esau for no reason other than his own pleasure, then God must be unjust. If in this verse God is postulating his power to do whatever he likes free from the censure of anyone, in quoting it Paul has vitiated his own argument.²⁹ In response to the question, "God is not unrighteous, is he?" this reading of the text makes Paul answer, "No, God is not unrighteous! He is powerful." To claim that someone has the power to take any action he pleases is not the same as to prove that the action is just. Thus it is no answer to the objection that the jury acted unjustly in freeing O. J. Simpson to rebut: "A jury has the power to make any decision it wants." On the other hand, when God's paronomasia is understood correctly it gives Paul's argument real force. In answer to the question Paul replies that God is not unrighteous, and then goes on to add a proof from the Scripture. Paul's argument could be expressed: "Not only is God not unjust, but he goes far beyond the demands of justice freely to lavish his mercy and compassion!"

²⁷Cranfield supports this understanding and says Calvin's reading of the verse is a "disastrous distortion of Paul's meaning." See Cranfield, p. 483.

²⁸*Institutes*, 3.11.11, p. 740.

²⁹Calvin says that one uses this phrase "to prevent [his] reasons from being investigated, . . . to rid himself of the censure of others, . . ." See the *Commentary ... Moses*, p. 381

Verses 16-18 Did God Completely Control Pharaoh When He Hardened His Heart?

Intertextual analysis shows that Calvin once again makes the mistake of historical plausibility when he explains Paul's use of the example of Pharaoh. Calvin treats God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as if Pharaoh's character and actions in this life were completely shaped by God, and that God had preordained Pharaoh's eternal destiny in Hell. In *Romans* Calvin states this view most clearly, first when he claims that God controlled all of Pharaoh's actions: "[Paul] affirms not only that [God] had foreseen Pharaoh's violence, and had the means at hand for restraining it, but that he had so ordained it on purpose, with the express design of providing a more notable demonstration of His power."³⁰ Then Calvin goes on to say God alone shaped Pharaoh's character and predestined him to damnation: "God says that Pharaoh had proceeded from him, and that his character was given to him by God."³¹ In the *Institutes* he repeats this concept several times, citing Paul's use of the idea of hardening as if it were equivalent to reprobation.³² Calvin's understanding of God's dealings with Pharaoh comes from the Exodus text, but his reading of that text is marred by a lack of nuance and flattening of the details. A more careful reading of the text shows not that God is a puppet-master making Pharaoh dance to his will, but that God dynamically relates to Pharaoh, using the choices Pharaoh makes to accomplish the divine purpose.

The passages that relate God's dealings with Pharaoh occur between Exodus 4 and 14. Seventeen times the text mentions the condition of Pharaoh's heart, using five different words or phrases to describe it.³³ Sometimes the text merely describes the condition of his heart as in 7:13 where it says "Pharaoh's heart became hard." Other times it specifies the agent of the hardening, as in 8:32 where it says, "Pharaoh hardened his heart" or in 9:12 where it attributes the action to God, saying, "The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart." While a simply tallying of number of mentions of each agent is probably not significant (There are twelve separate incidents: God is the agent five times, Pharaoh is the agent six times, once it is not stated. One time (Exodus 10:1 and 10:3) both God and Pharaoh are said to be responsible.), what is significant is the timing of the actions. The first mentions of hardening are when the Lord twice promises to

³⁰*Romans*, pp. 206-207.

³¹*Ibid.*, 207. Several other times on this page and the previous one Calvin repeats this idea. He also speaks of Pharaoh as reprobate on pages 152-153 and 210.

³²*Institutes*, 3.22.11, p. 947, 3.24.1, p. 966, and 3.24.14, p. 981.

³³Here is a table listing the mentions of the condition of Pharaoh's heart:

Ref	Text	When	Actor	Word
Ex 4:21	I will harden [Pharaoh's] heart	In Midian	God	חזק (strong)
Ex 7:3	I will harden Pharaoh's heart	Before meeting	God	כבד (hard)
Ex 7:13	Pharaoh's heart became hard	After snakes	?	חזק (strong)
Ex 7:22	Pharaoh's heart became hard	After blood	?	חזק (strong)
Ex 8:15	[Pharaoh] hardened his heart	After frogs	Pharaoh	קשה (heavy)
Ex 8:19	Pharaoh's heart was hard	After gnats	?	חזק (strong)
Ex 8:32	Pharaoh hardened his heart	After flies	Pharaoh	קשה (heavy)
Ex 9:7	[Pharaoh's] heart was unyielding	After livestock	?	חזק (strong)
Ex 9:12	The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart	After boils	God	חזק (strong)
Ex 9:17	[Pharaoh] still sets [him]self against	Before hail	Pharaoh	עוה (exalt)
Ex 9:34	[Pharaoh] hardened [his] heart	After hail	Pharaoh	חזק (strong)
Ex 10:1	I have hardened his heart	Before locusts	God	חזק (strong)
Ex 10:3	[Pharaoh] refuse[s] to humble himself	Before locusts	Pharaoh	סלל (yield)
Ex 10:20	The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart	After locusts	God	קשה (heavy)
Ex 10:27	The Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart	Before Passover	God	קשה (heavy)
Ex 13:15	Pharaoh stubbornly refused	Before Passover	Pharaoh	כבד (hard)
Ex 14:4	I will harden Pharaoh's heart	Before Red Sea	God	חזק (strong)

harden Pharaoh's heart some time in the future. Then two times it states that Pharaoh's heart became hard without mentioning who did the hardening. Next come four mentions which alternate between Pharaoh hardening his own heart and the simple declaration that Pharaoh's heart was hard. Finally the text says God took action to harden Pharaoh's heart. Only after the text twice specifically attributes the hardening of his heart to Pharaoh does it say that God continued the process.

Even when the Exodus text plainly states that the Lord hardened Pharaoh's heart, it could be argued that author is merely following the early Hebrew practice of assigning to God actions which later texts reveal to have other, more proximate causes. Thus Amos 3:6 asks "When disaster comes to a city, has not the Lord caused it?" referring to God as the ultimate cause and ignoring the other agents involved. The clearest example of this characteristic is the story of David counting his men which the earlier account in 2 Samuel 24:1 attributes to God while later revelation in 1 Chronicles 21:1 shows that the immediate cause is Satan. Thus it could be argued that when Exodus says "God hardened Pharaoh's heart" it does not mean to exclude Pharaoh's agency, but merely to explain that God sovereignly used Pharaoh's free choices to achieve his ultimate purpose, just as the Lord used Satan's actions in David's case. In this way the shifting between saying God hardened Pharaoh's heart and Pharaoh hardened his own heart in Exodus can be understood as sometimes emphasizing Pharaoh's responsibility for his action and sometimes pointing out God's power to use even sinful actions to work out his purposes.

Another possible way to understand the Exodus text is to see that both Pharaoh and the Lord were involved in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. This view notes that the Lord's action comes only after Pharaoh initiates the process. God's actions of making Pharaoh's heart heavy, strong, and hard are then understood as his judgmental response to Pharaoh's sin. Just as in Romans 1 where it reports that God responds to human sinfulness by giving the sinner over to greater sin, so here God punishes Pharaoh by allowing him to go on to greater sin in the path he has chosen. Prudence would dictate that Pharaoh should give in to God's demands. This is the course of action Pharaoh's magicians counsel (Ex 8:19), but Pharaoh is headstrong and refuses to listen. After being defeated by the first three plagues, Pharaoh might have done the right thing for the wrong reason: he might have yielded to the Lord out of fear and weakness. God, however, forestalls this possibility by "hardening" Pharaoh's heart, by giving him the resolve to continue to resist. The Lord gives Pharaoh the courage to do what he really wants to do instead of allowing him to surrender out of fear. Thus the text pictures a subtle interplay of human and divine actions. It does not portray God's heavy hand controlling a passive will. Rather it shows Pharaoh misusing God's good gifts. He uses the strength and determination supplied to him by the Lord in order to stand against God where a lesser man would capitulate out of fearful weakness. To fail to see the background of Paul's intertextuality is to violate the criterion of historical plausibility. As long ago as the second century Origen suggested this interpretation of the text, and his views were endorsed by Jerome almost two centuries later.³⁴

Either of these two ways of understanding the Exodus makes sense in the light of the rest of Scripture. The first takes seriously the tendency of the earlier texts to ignore proximate causes and attribute all causality to God. The second sees God's actions as judgments of the kind reported in Romans 1. Sadly, Calvin does not interpret these Exodus texts according to the analogy of Scripture. He ignores the subtleties of the Exodus text and treats Pharaoh as the passive recipient of God's activity. Once again this mistake is puzzling because when Calvin is commenting on the Exodus text he knows that "hardening" means that God gave Pharaoh the courage to continue in the course of action he had already chosen. Calvin repeatedly explains the concept this way, although at times he does speak of it as if it meant that God had predestined Pharaoh to

³⁴Origen, *De Principiis*, 3.1.8-11 (both Greek and Latin texts) in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 4:308-12. Jerome, *To Palinus*, Letter 85, section 3 in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979) 6:182. More recently both Morris and Cranfield make the same point. See Morris, p. 361 and Cranfield, p. 488.

damnation.³⁵ When Calvin writes in the *Institutes*, regrettably, this sophisticated understanding is absent. There he uniformly speaks as if God were the only one who made the choices recorded in this passage thus offering an historically implausible meaning.

Verses 19-20 Can No One Question God about Salvation and Damnation?

Like his mistake in interpreting vv. 16-18, Calvin's error in explaining vv. 19-20 comes from assigning historically implausible meanings to the biblical texts that Paul uses to make his argument. This time Calvin ignores the biblical background of Paul's language about the potter and the clay in verses 20-21. He thus misunderstands Paul's point and argues from these verses that no one can hold God's dealings with humanity to the standard of justice. Commenting on this passage Calvin says that "it is profitless to dispute with God," that God's election of some and his damnation of others is "a mystery which our minds do not comprehend, but which we ought to adore with reverence," and that "... it is a very wicked thing merely to investigate the causes of God's will. ... When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply, because he has willed it."³⁶

To support his point that humans should not question God about their own or anyone else's salvation Calvin relies on his own understanding of Paul's pottery imagery: he says, "[Paul] represses this arrogance of contending with God by a most appropriate metaphor"³⁷ That understanding, unfortunately, is marred by Calvin's neglect of the way the Old Testament uses this metaphor and of the way Paul himself uses it in another passage. The first reference to God as the potter and humanity as the clay occurs in Isaiah 29:16 where the prophet uses it to argue that God has complete knowledge about human plans and activities. The next appearance is Isaiah 45:9 when God says that no one should question his use of Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem. Isaiah again uses this image in 64:8 when Israel appeals to God to be merciful because they are the work of his hand. The Lord employs this metaphor when he sends Jeremiah to the potter's house as recorded in Jeremiah 18. Here Jeremiah witnesses the potter's frustration as he tries to make one kind of pot out of the lump of clay, and then changes his plan and makes a different kind of pot. God wants Jeremiah to learn that the potter is not sovereign over the clay, shaping it according to his peremptory will, but because different lumps of clay are suited for different kinds of pots, the potter must be responsive to the kind of clay in his hand. The theological lesson is that God is not arbitrary, but is responsive to human activities in his apportioning of blessing and judgment. The Bible's final use of ceramic imagery comes from Paul himself when in 2 Timothy 2:20 he urges people to cleanse themselves so they can be used for noble purposes.³⁸

From these biblical uses of the pottery metaphor we see that it has a variety of meanings, but none of them conveys the idea of arbitrary power over the souls of individuals that Calvin ascribes to it. Indeed, twice it has exactly the opposite meaning: God uses it to tell Jeremiah that he takes note of human actions in determining his response and Paul urges people to make themselves into noble vessels. The meaning closest to Calvin's understanding is the one in Isaiah about Cyrus, but even here salvation and damnation are not in question, but heilsgeschichte. God holds unquestionable not his right to save people or send them to hell, but his right to choose a heathen to accomplish his purpose on earth.³⁹

³⁵Hardening in the sense of encouraging occurs in *Exodus*, pp. 101-102, 140-141, 156, 163-164, 167, 175, 180, 185, 205, and 240, but in the sense of reprobation occurs in pp. 152-153, 194, and 210.

³⁶*Romans*, pp. 207, 209 and *Institutes*, 3.23.2, p. 949. For similar ideas see also *Romans*, pp. 203, 210 as well as *Institutes* 3.22.11, p. 947, 3.23.1, p. 948, 3.23.2, p. 949, 3.23.8, p. 957, 3.24.17, p. 987.

³⁷*Romans*, p. 210.

³⁸Hays, pp. 65-66, supports this understanding of Paul's imagery.

³⁹Dunn says the more natural use of the pottery metaphor is not to speak of the salvation or damnation of individuals, but "vessels put to differing uses within history...." See Dunn, p. 557.

It is possible that in using the picture of the potter and the clay that Paul is pulling this image from its biblical context and giving it the unique meaning Calvin thinks it has. Here intertextual criteria of historical plausibility, thematic coherence, and satisfaction show that this occurrence is unlikely for three reasons. The first is God's tolerance of questioning by his creatures. If Calvin is correct that no one has the right to talk back to God about salvation, why does God encourage Abraham to do exactly that in the matter of Sodom (Genesis 18)? Think how Moses argued God out of destroying Israel (Exodus 32). The second reason to doubt Calvin's understanding is that both in Jeremiah's and in Paul's other use of this language exactly the opposite idea emerges. God tells Jeremiah he is responsive and Paul tells people to make themselves clean, useful vessels. Finally, the third and strongest reason to reject Calvin's understanding of these verses is that it is unnecessary. Here the satisfaction criterion applies. There is no need to find a new understanding for this imagery because the established meaning fits so well. Paul's language here is closest to that of Isaiah 45 where what must not be questioned is how God assigns roles in heilsgeschichte. Because the language is so similar it is most satisfactory to understand that the meaning is also similar. All along Paul has been speaking of how God uses different people in his plan to save the world. Here he uses Isaiah's imagery and Isaiah's meaning to reiterate the idea: God sovereignly assigns to each the place in salvation history and none may question that role. Calvin wrongly imports a thoroughly unbiblical meaning to Paul's metaphor and thus misunderstands his point.

Verses 21-24 Does God Create Some People Just to Damn Them?

It may seem that intertextual analysis would not help understand vv. 21-24 because Paul does not explicitly cite the Old Testament in these verses. However, while Paul never explicitly quotes any Scripture, it is evident that the case of Pharaoh is still on his mind. Here the criterion of satisfaction is most useful. It shows us that Calvin misreads these four verses. Calvin has never accurately heard Paul's answer to the accusation that because most Jews are not saved then God's word must have failed. He continually reads Paul's answer as if Paul were arguing that God never planned to save all the Jews. According to Calvin, God elects some to salvation and others to reprobation. In the light of this understanding, Calvin asserts that verses 21-24 teach that God created some people to be saved and others to be damned. In commenting on these verses he says: "...God determines the [eternal] condition of every individual according to His will," "... before men are born their lot is assigned to each of them by the secret will of God," "... the ruin of the ungodly is ... ordained by His counsel and will," and "... the ungodly themselves have been created for the specific purpose of perishing."⁴⁰ In the *Institutes* he affirms the same idea saying, "... it is utterly inconsistent to transfer the preparation for destruction to anything but God's secret plan."⁴¹

Most obvious of Calvin's mistakes is his misreading of v. 21. Here Paul says God makes some "for noble purposes and some for common use." True, the word which Paul uses, $\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\iota\sigma\mu\acute{o}\nu$, can mean dishonor, shame, or infamy, but in this context its most natural meaning, captured by the RSV and NIV, is "menial" or "common."⁴² Calvin does not read this plain meaning out of Paul's words, but reads his own misunderstanding into them. Calvin treats this verse as if it said that God made some for noble purposes and others for demolition. When referring to those made for common use, Calvin employs the terms of "ruin," "perishing," and "destruction."⁴³ Paul is not saying that God is a potter who makes some vessels for the sole purpose of smashing them to show his power over them. Instead, his point is that God chooses some people to have a role in his noble plan to save the world and allows others to have the common lot of humanity.

⁴⁰*Romans*, pp. 203, 207, and 208. Calvin restates this idea three more times on pages 211 and 212.

⁴¹*Institutes* 3.23.1, p. 948. In 3.23.11, p. 959 the context shows the vessels made unto dishonor are damned, and in the same point is repeated in I 3.23.12, p. 961 and in I 3.24.13, p. 979.

⁴²Cranfield makes this point specifically in his text and in a footnote, saying in the latter, "The potter does not make ordinary, everyday pots merely in order to destroy them." See Cranfield, p. 492.

⁴³*Institutes* 3.23.1, p. 948.

In the next verse Paul explains how God can use even bad people to be part of his noble plan. Sadly, here again Calvin has imported an alien meaning into the text. Paul is continuing to talk about heilsgeschichte and how God sometimes defers punishing the ungodly so as to give his plans time to mature. Paul has been using the story of the Exodus to show how God can use even evil people to accomplish his good purposes. He does not explicitly say that verses 22-24 refer back to the Exodus story, but they can best be understood in that context. God could have punished Pharaoh at the beginning of his disobedience, when Pharaoh's sin first provoked God's wrath and doomed him to destruction, but he did not. Instead God bore with great patience the continued sins of Pharaoh, his repeated refusals to let Israel go, so that God's power could be shown in the various plagues, and God's mercy to his chosen people in their miraculous deliverance. If God had killed Pharaoh after his first refusal to "let my people go" justice would have been served, but God's power against the gods of Egypt would not have been revealed. By letting Pharaoh live even after he deserved to die, God created the opportunity to demonstrate over and over again that he was the lord of heaven and earth. This straightforward reading of the text makes perfect sense and fits into the context where Paul mentions Pharaoh. Chrysostom understood it this way around the year 400, so Calvin violates the history of interpretation criterion with his novel interpretation.⁴⁴ There is no need for Calvin to speculate about the "secret will of God" or to posit what God does "before men are born." In this understanding of the text Pharaoh became an "object of wrath" not before he was born, but when he kindled God's anger by sinning against him. He was "prepared for destruction" not because he was "created for the specific purpose of perishing," but because his deserved punishment was deferred. Paul is giving a historical example of how God can give an evil person an important role in his plan to save the world, not discussing what God does in eternity with the destinies of immortal souls. Calvin removes Paul's example from the realm of history and turns it into theological conjecture.⁴⁵

Calvin's treatment of verses 22-24 in Romans 9 is typical of his handling of the entire chapter. He reads its verses in isolation from their Old Testament backgrounds and interprets them in the light of his equivocal misunderstanding of election. Because Calvin fails to acknowledge that "not elect" does not necessarily mean "damned" he reads the whole chapter as a defense of God's right to save some and condemn others. This fundamental misreading of the text leads him to the further errors of neglecting the Hebrew idiom God employs, to flattening Exodus's nuanced presentation of God's dealings with Pharaoh, to disregarding the biblical background of Paul's pottery language, and to dehistoricizing Paul's proof that God uses bad people to accomplish his good purposes. In explaining Romans 9 Calvin offers readings that violate four of the seven criteria of intertextual analysis: thematic coherence, historical plausibility, the history of interpretation, and satisfaction.

If Calvin is Wrong, How Should We Understand Romans 9?

John Piper, in his magisterial monograph on this chapter, claims that no exegetical scheme other than Calvin's answers the big question Paul raises in Romans 9: "Why are so few Jews saved?" Piper's own analysis, which agrees with Calvin, says that Paul's answer is that God does not will them to be saved.⁴⁶ This answer, even when it is presented, as Piper's is, with careful attention to the text and awareness of opposing viewpoints, is inadequate. Piper rightfully points out that the whole chapter hangs on a correct understanding of Exodus 33:19. He believes that this crucial text is meant to emphasize God's "sovereign freedom" in limiting the distribution of his mercy.⁴⁷ For the reasons cited above, this view is unsatisfactory. True, some Jewish rabbis and Christian theologians have supported it, but their authority cannot outweigh the Hebrew idiom, the context in which God utters it, and the use Paul makes of it in his argument. Since Piper, like Calvin, has

⁴⁴Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, no. 16 in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first series, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1979) 11:468.

⁴⁵Dunn rejects reading these verses in a double-predestinarian sense. See Dunn, pp. 559-560.

⁴⁶John Piper, *The Justification of God* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1993), p. 58, 73, 218.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 88.

incorrectly understood the central text in Paul's argument, he is unable to see how Paul defends the righteousness of God.

Paul's justification of God, his defense of his righteousness, is not that God wills for only a few Jews to be saved. His answer comes not just in verses 1-23 with 24-33 as a transition to Israel's eschatological hope discussed in chapters 10 and 11. Instead, verse 32 answers the question. Paul says so few Jews are saved because they did not pursue righteousness and salvation by faith. Of course Paul arrives at this conclusion only after an argument of some length. He begins by discussing the advantages of the Jews, emphasizing by the items he mentions Israel's crucial role in salvation history in verses 3-5. He then goes on to say that just because the Jews as a people played an important role in heilsgeschichte, it does not mean every individual Jew is saved. This understanding comes from verses 6-9 where Paul points out that not all of Abraham's descendants are his children, nor are the natural children necessarily God's children. Paul's answer to the question of the paucity of Jewish Christians is to point out that having a role in salvation history does not guarantee a place in heaven.⁴⁸

After asserting that one may be an important figure in heilsgeschichte without being saved, Paul introduces the contrast between Esau and Jacob in verses 10-13 not to argue that one was saved and the other damned, but to show that God's choice of a person to play a role in saving the world says nothing about that individual's righteousness or personal merit. Nothing Jacob or Esau did earned or lost them a place in God's salvific plan. The Bible says God loved Jacob and the nation that sprang from him meaning that he gave them the privileged role of being the vehicle of his salvation. Esau, on the other hand, was loved less in that he and his descendants had no special role to play. Does this choice of one and not the other for a place in salvation history mean that God is unjust? This is the question Paul raises and answers in verses 14-15. He cries out, "Certainly not! Instead of even being close to injustice, God by his very nature is extremely merciful and compassionate!"

Paul has just shown that playing a role in salvation history does not depend on human goodness or merit. Even less does it depend on a person's desire or effort. Verses 16-18 call us to look at Pharaoh: he did not wish to cooperate with God's plan, yet the Lord used him to proclaim God's name in all the earth. God can assign good or bad roles to people as it pleases him and no one can question God's plan. Look at the example of Cyrus. He was just as much an unbeliever as was Pharaoh, but God used him for the good plan of rebuilding Jerusalem. Just as a potter uses one part of a lump of clay for an ornamental pot and the other for a common water jar, so God assigns parts in salvation history. Some get the good roles and others get the bad, not according to their goodness or desire, but according to God's own plan. This is the message of verses 16-21.

To make this point even more clearly, in verses 22-29 Paul asserts that God sometimes restrains his judgment and keeps it from falling on sinful people. When it suits his long-range plan, God will postpone their punishment in order to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy. God allowed Pharaoh to disobey him many times, not because he was too weak to punish him, but in order to use Pharaoh's stubbornness as a foil for his greatness.

God's goal in working out his plan of heilsgeschichte is that both Jews and Gentiles might be saved. Those who responded to God in faith obtained his righteousness, but those who pursued it by works did not receive it. No, God's word has not failed, but many Jews, despite their prominent role in heilsgeschichte, are not saved because they have not responded to God in faith as Abraham did so long ago as verses 30-33 make clear.

⁴⁸Theodoret of Cyrus makes this point in his commentary on Romans 9. He says that Paul is arguing against the Jews that salvation is given by faith, not by the law. Paul's intention in this chapter is to "denounce the unbelief of the Jews." Cited in Parmentier, p. 9.

Intertextual analysis makes it clear that Calvin has misread Romans 9. Applying Hays's seven tests to the individual verses shows that Calvin erred in four of the seven ways by misunderstanding the Old Testament background of Paul's argument. In addition, testing the whole passage by these criteria reveals that Calvin fails the other three of Hay's tests: those of thematic coherence, the history of interpretation, and satisfaction. Reading Romans 9 as an excursus about individual election nested in a discussion of the roles of faith and the law in the process of salvation destroys the coherence of Paul's overall argument in the epistle.⁴⁹ With the exception of Augustine, no important author before him reads the text in the way he did, so Calvin fails the history of interpretation test. Finally the most important test is that of satisfaction. Does the proposed reading make sense? Here Calvin fails most glaringly. When Calvin answers the question, "Why are so few Jews saved?" by pointing to the inscrutable election of God, his answer flies in the face of all Romans says about the truth, love, and justice of God.

Romans shows the righteousness of God not when he dispenses mercy and wrath on whomever he pleases nor, as Piper says, in "*his unswerving commitment always to preserve the honor of his name and display his glory* [emphasis original]"⁵⁰ but in his saving people by faith "from first to last" (Romans 1:17). Yes, God is sovereign, but he is not capricious. Romans 9 does not teach that God saves some and damns others willy-nilly. In the early church Origen, Irenaeus, Chrysostom, and Jerome resisted this reading of the text. Instead of teaching divine determinism, this chapter fits in with the rest of the book, and with the rest of the Bible, to teach that God saves those who respond to his gift with faith. There is no room for human boasting, because even the faith to respond to God's grace comes from God. As John tells us, Jesus is the light that enlightens every person (John 1:9). And just as there is no room for human boasting when the gift is received, so there is no room for blaming God when the gift is rejected. Calvin need never have feared: a correct understanding of Romans 9 frees us from belief in the "dreadful" decree.

⁴⁹Dunn says that "the recognition of the coherence and climactic character of these chapters in relation to the argument of Romans as a whole strongly reinforces the now widespread objection against the older attempts to interpret chaps. 9-11 primarily as the exposition of a dogma of predestination in relation to the individual...." See Dunn, p. 520.

⁵⁰Piper, p. 219.