

SOR Faculty Publications and Presentations

---

Spring 2015

**Prepared by Whom? Reprobation and Non-Calvinist  
Interpretations of Romans 9:22**

Wayne Brindle  
*Liberty University, wabrindl@liberty.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor\\_fac\\_pubs](https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/sor_fac_pubs)

---

**Recommended Citation**

"Prepared by Whom? Reprobation and Non-Calvinist Interpretations of Romans 9:22," *Criswell Theological Review* N.S.12/2 (Spring 2015): 135-146.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Crossing. It has been accepted for inclusion in SOR Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Crossing. For more information, please contact [scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu](mailto:scholarlycommunications@liberty.edu).

## Prepared by Whom? Reprobation and Non-Calvinist Interpretations of Romans 9:22

Wayne A. Brindle  
Professor of Biblical Studies  
Liberty University

It has become commonplace among Calvinist writers and preachers to portray Romans 9 as the cornerstone of biblical proof for election and predestination.<sup>1</sup> Consider the following statement by James White: “This tremendous passage of Scripture is so clear, so strong, that it truly does speak for itself.”<sup>2</sup>

Calvinists often allege that the doctrine of reprobation (God’s choice of some for hell, just as He chose some for heaven) is as much an inevitable deduction of logic as an exegetical conclusion from Scripture. Note the teaching of Louis Berkhof:

The doctrine of reprobation naturally follows from the logic of the situation. The decree of election inevitably implies the decree of reprobation. If the all-wise God, possessed of infinite knowledge, has eternally purposed to save some, then He *ipso facto* also purposed not to save others. If He has chosen or elected some, then He has by that very fact also rejected others. Brunner warns against this argument, since the Bible does not in a single word teach a divine predestination unto rejection. But it seems to us that the Bible does not contradict but justifies the logic in question. Since the Bible is primarily a revelation of redemption, it naturally does not have as much to say about reprobation as about election. But what it says is quite sufficient, cf. Matt. 11:25-26; Rom. 9:13, 17, 18, 21, 22; 11:7; Jude 4; 1 Pet. 2:8.<sup>3</sup>

Of the ten passages listed by Berkhof as supporting (but not teaching) reprobation, fully half are located in chapter 9 of Romans. Non-Calvinists have recognized the importance of Romans 9 in the debate, and have attempted to develop persuasive arguments in opposition.<sup>4</sup> Whether these arguments have any viability in the face of Romans 9:22 is the subject of this paper. The purpose of this presentation is not to attempt to resolve the Calvinist-Arminian debate, but merely to investigate whether any non-Calvinist readings of this passage are exegetically and theologically possible within the scope of what Paul was trying to accomplish in Romans 9.

I will attempt to analyze the passage along three lines:

---

<sup>1</sup> See Thomas R. Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation?” in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, eds. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 89. Calvinists often refer to John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), as the best contemporary defense of this approach.

<sup>2</sup> James White, *The Potter’s Freedom* (Amityville, NY: Calvary Press Publishing, 2000), 205.

<sup>3</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 117-18.

<sup>4</sup> Schreiner, “Romans 9,” 90; see C. Gordon Olson, *Getting the Gospel Right: A Balanced View of Salvation Truth* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2005), 298-304.

1. The relationship of 9:22 to Paul's argument throughout Romans 9, especially in light of Paul's reference to the hardening of Pharaoh and his illustration of the potter and clay.
2. The lexical meaning and significance of the crucial terms in Romans 9:22 (σκεύη ὀργῆς – vessels of wrath; κατηρτισμένα – prepared; and ἀπόλειαν – destruction) within their context.
3. The syntax of the perfect middle/passive participle (κατηρτισμένα), and its use in other Greek literature.

### **The Jewish Context of Romans 9:22**

A dominant issue in many of Paul's letters is how Judaism and Jewish Christianity relate to Gentile Christianity.<sup>5</sup> The epistle to the Romans may be read as Paul's version of salvation history, which attempts to solve the "Jewish question" while at the same time restating in detail Paul's universal gospel in order to gain the support of the complete Roman church. Paul opens Romans by tying the Gospel for Gentiles and Christ's resurrection to the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel through the Jewish Messiah (Rom. 1:1-7). God's salvation for humanity is first to the Jew and then to the Greek (Rom. 1:16; 2:9-10; 9:24; 15:8-9). Paul has this order in mind throughout Romans (cf. 3:19-21; 4:16; 9-11). As Mark Nanos puts it, "The risen Christ is the Savior of Israel first, and also of the whole world."<sup>6</sup> David's promised Son will rule over Israel and give the Gentiles as Israel's inheritance (Ps. 2:8).

Paul's teaching on justification by faith can be understood as an answer to the question, "How is it possible for the Jew and the Gentile to stand on the same level of advantage before God?"<sup>7</sup> The opening sections of the epistle demonstrate that the Law, rather than giving the Jew a position of advantage over the Gentile, really gives him greater responsibility and potential for judgment. Paul shows that the Jew is just as much in need of God's grace as the Gentile (1:18-3:20). He then describes the means by which Jews as well as Gentiles can receive that grace (3:21-5:21). He also explains how these blessings are experienced in the present (6-8).

### Paul's Argument in Romans 9-11

When Paul arrives at chapter 9, he is ready to deal with what some would see as the major "salvation-history" question of the book: "If Israel's blessings are freely open to Gentiles, what then of the promises to Israel itself?"<sup>8</sup> Glenn lists four sub-questions to which Paul devotes himself in 9-11:

1. How can God offer the gospel to all people if it is based on the Old Testament Scriptures, which give priority of place to the Jews?

<sup>5</sup> Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* 179.

<sup>6</sup> Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996), 227.

<sup>7</sup> Donald H. Madvig, "The Missionary Preaching of Paul: A Problem in New Testament Theology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (June 1977): 150.

<sup>8</sup> James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 1988), lxii.

2. How can this gospel be true if Israel as a whole rejected it?
3. How can this gospel go to the Gentiles if Israel does not first receive it?
4. If God has not kept His promises to the Israelites concerning their salvation and election, how can Christians be assured He will keep His promises to them?<sup>9</sup>

As he begins to answer these questions, Paul returns first to his answer to the first Jewish objection he propounded in 3:1: “What advantage is there in being a Jew?” There he said, “Much in every way! The Jews have been entrusted with the oracles of God,” referring, apparently, to God’s covenant promises, which Paul had already said belong “to the Jew first” in salvation (1:16). In chapter 9, Paul lists many of the great advantages that God had given Israel: the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship of God, the promises, and the patriarchs of Israel (9:4-5). Then immediately he deals with a major stumbling block for the Jews’ acceptance of Paul’s perspective on the gospel: Does the fact that most of the Jews have so far rejected Paul’s gospel imply that God has now rejected Israel and taken back His promises?

Paul’s answer to this question is a resounding “No.” God never promised to save all the physical descendants of Abraham, Paul says, and he proves it in two ways. First, when God gave Abraham the original promise, He stated specifically that it would be fulfilled in Abraham’s son, Isaac (9:7). It is only the one God named in the promise for whom He should be held accountable, not Abraham’s other son, Ishmael. A Jewish objector might say, however, that Paul had missed an important point. Ishmael was the son of an Egyptian woman, therefore obviously not part of God’s “chosen” people. Paul therefore proceeds to a second line of proof. Isaac’s wife, Rebecca, conceived two sons at the same time by one man—that is, Jacob and Esau. Yet God chose one of them for His covenantal blessing, not both. Paul notes that God in fact chose the younger of the twins before either of them were born, so clearly God’s choice did not depend on their works or their desires. He quotes passages from both Genesis and Malachi in order to show this was God’s clear word on Jacob (Israel). It is clear from these arguments, then, that the Jews should not think that every physical Jew has to receive God’s saving grace in order for God to be true to His promises.

In fact, Paul next demonstrates that God can go beyond justice (cf. Rom. 2:7-10) and show His mercy to some but not all (9:14-29). God gave Moses His mercy, for example, yet He judged Pharaoh for his rebellion. God always judges on the basis of works (2:6), but He is free to go beyond judgment and give mercy to some (9:18). Does this mean that God unfairly judges the sin which He himself causes? Obviously not. The point of the illustration concerning the potter and his clay is not to portray God treating people like dirt, but rather to rebuke the attitude that would imply that God is unrighteous (cf. 3:3-8). The real answer comes in 9:22-23. God wants to show both His justice (wrath and power) and His mercy (riches of glory). Those who either are prepared or prepare themselves for destruction will receive just punishment, just as did Pharaoh (9:22). On the other hand, those to whom God has shown mercy and whom He has prepared beforehand will receive His glory (9:23). This latter group includes the entire church, both Jews and Gentiles (9:24).

---

<sup>9</sup> W. Edward Glenny, “The ‘People of God’ in Romans 9:25-26,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (January-March 1995): 46.

But precisely why is it that the Jews are rejecting God's gospel? From 9:30 to 10:21 Paul presents three reasons. First, as a group they have refused to accept God's grace by faith (9:30-33). Why is this? Because they have stumbled over Christ, the prophesied stumbling stone and rock of entrapment. They have preferred to try to establish their own works-righteousness, rather than confess Christ for righteousness (10:3-4). Second, they have ignored what the Scriptures themselves say concerning righteousness by faith. Deuteronomy 30 spells out God's way of mercy and acceptance, which is exactly the way of Paul's gospel: simply confess Christ as Lord, and believe that God raised him from the dead (cf. Rom. 1:4). This mercy is in fact freely available to everyone who will come to Christ for it (10:11-13). Third, when the apostles preached the gospel of Christ to Israel, they heard it and understood it, but they didn't believe it (faith should come through hearing the message about Christ—10:17). God did His part to offer mercy, but most of the nation refused it because they wouldn't bring themselves to put their trust in the Christ whom they crucified. The Jews are the guilty ones; God fulfilled His promises and announced that fact to the Jews everywhere, but they refused to accept it on God's terms.

But Paul shows that in spite of Israel's stubbornness and rejection, God has not thrown His chosen people out of His plan and promises. God is always calling out a remnant (11:1-6). There is always a believing remnant, chosen by God's grace and drawn to Him in faith. There are Jewish believers throughout Israel and the diaspora who are part of God's remnant. But the bulk of Israel is blind and spiritually insensitive (hardened), as part of God's judicial judgment of the nation for their continual rejection. One reason Paul is so anxious to win Gentiles to Christ is to cause unbelieving Jews to realize how many promised blessings they're missing (but the Gentiles are receiving), so they too will put away their stubbornness and come to Christ in humble trust.

With the olive tree illustration, Paul arrives at his explanation of how Jews and Gentiles presently fit together into God's ongoing salvation program (11:17). The tree represents God's covenant with Abraham. As a judgment on Israel for their rejection of the Messiah and their unbelief, God sliced some branches off the tree; that is, He set the bulk of the nation aside from His covenantal blessings. He turned instead to the Gentiles, grafting them like unnatural, wild branches into His blessings. They did not have to become natural branches (i.e., Jews) in order to be grafted in. As Gentiles in the Church, they are fully partners with believing Jews (Gal. 3:18) and receive all the spiritual blessings that Jews are presently receiving. Yet God will still fulfill His original kingdom promises to national Israel (11:25-27), because God's promises and calling are irrevocable (11:29). For the time being, the bulk of Israel is hardened (this hardness and blindness are removed in Christ—2 Cor. 3:14-15—so the "hardness" clearly does not indicate reprobation). But the day is coming, after the full number of Gentiles have been saved, when God will remove this hardness of heart, save His people Israel, and bring His covenantal promises to them back to completion (11:25).

At the end of chapter 11, Paul reaches the climax of his retelling of salvation history. God is now showing mercy to Gentiles (through the preaching of the universal gospel), whereas the vast majority of Jews are stubbornly refusing to "obey the faith" (11:30-31). The time will come, however, when God will show mercy to them also, that they may be saved. God will finish his covenant work with them, because He considers His word and His calling of Israel irrevocable. Yet God's plan of salvation is universal, just as the sacrifice of His Son has universal benefit. The Gentiles have been added (grafted) into the promises, yet they too must believe in order to be saved, just as the Jews. God has indeed shut everyone up to the judgment

of disobedience (cf. 2:6-11; 3:10-18), in order that He might offer His mercy to everyone, on His own terms—through faith in Christ.

### Paul's Argument in Romans 9:1-13

A most debated issue of Romans 9 is whether Paul is there speaking of salvation or simply of the historical destiny of Israel.<sup>10</sup> I take it as obvious that in verses 1-3 Paul refers to his intense desire that all Jews (his “kinsmen according to the flesh”) be saved, and that the “calling” of both Jews and Gentiles in verse 24 involves personal salvation. That, however, does not prove that Paul is discussing personal salvation throughout the chapter. We must carefully investigate his argument at each point.

Verses 4 and 5 detail eight privileges given to Israel as a whole, none of which necessitate an assumption of personal salvation on the part of those who received and enjoyed them. For example, the nation as a whole was “adopted” as God’s “son” (Exod. 4:22), the nation as a whole received the covenants and the Law and the promises; but within the nation there were many (at times perhaps most) who were not rightly related to God and did not respond to Him by faith (cf. Rom. 11:4-7 and the concept of “remnant”). Even the Messiah (9:5) was given to the entire nation, most of whom rejected him.

Paul’s argument in 9:6-13 is specifically designed to show that God remains righteous and true in spite of Israel’s rejection of the gospel. This is so because, as God’s choice of Isaac and then of Jacob for covenant blessings shows, the promises to which Paul there refers never applied to all of Abraham’s physical descendants. The choice of Isaac over Ishmael was not for personal salvation but for the covenant. The choice of Jacob over Esau was specifically for covenant leadership. Only a previous assumption of both unconditional election and reprobation allows one to read an emphasis on personal salvation into this argument. A common message of both testaments is that a right relationship with God does not come merely through physical relationship, but by faith in the true God.

### Paul's Argument in Romans 9:14-18

In 9:14 Paul introduces the question of God’s justice or fairness in refusing to guarantee a perpetual universal blessing to the entire nation. He uses several Old Testament examples to illustrate God’s justice and to demonstrate that complaints are neither justified nor proper.

First, Paul quotes God’s reply to Moses when the latter, after Israel displeased God enough for Him to want to destroy them, asked God to show him His glory. God responded to this request by saying, “I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion” (9:15; Exod. 33:19). The context in Exodus has nothing to do with personal salvation, but rather with God’s grace and compassion toward Moses (already saved) and secondarily toward Israel as a whole. Paul concludes that this blessing and compassion do not depend on man’s desire (“him who wills”) nor on man’s works (“him who runs”), but on the mercy-showing God (9:16). Nothing in Paul’s use of the Exodus passage so far teaches a concept of reprobation—either in Exodus or in Paul’s application of it.

---

<sup>10</sup> See Schreiner, “Romans 9,” 90-98.

Next Paul brings forth the negative example of God's interaction with Pharaoh, through which Pharaoh's heart was hardened to the extent that he lost his first-born son (9:17). Paul's inference from this is that God "has mercy on whom He desires" (such as Moses) and "He hardens whom He desires" (such as Pharaoh) (9:18). Reformed scholars sometimes see a sign of reprobation here. Moo says,

The "hardening" Paul portrays . . . is a sovereign act of God that is not *caused* by anything in those individuals who are hardened. And 9:22-23 and 11:7 suggest that the outcome of hardening is damnation. . . . just as God decides, on the basis of nothing but his own sovereign pleasure, to bestow his grace and so to save some individuals, so he also decides, on the basis of nothing but his own sovereign pleasure, to pass over others and so to damn them.<sup>11</sup>

But many other Calvinist commentators are not so extreme. Sanday and Headlam, for example, after noting that Calvin saw in this passage "election to salvation" and "reprobation to death, that men were created that they might perish," state that Paul "never says or implies that God has created man for the purpose of his damnation."<sup>12</sup> Morris says that "neither here nor anywhere else is God said to harden anyone who had not first hardened himself."<sup>13</sup> Contra Moo and Schreiner<sup>14</sup> ("One cannot elude the conclusion that Paul teaches double predestination here"), the evidence of Exodus 4-14 demonstrates that the hardening of Pharaoh depended primarily upon his own stubborn rebellion, as follows: (1) God announced to Moses that He would harden Pharaoh's heart so that God would be able to show His power, signs, and wonders (Exod. 4:21; 7:3); (2) Pharaoh rejected Moses' message and God's plagues, and hardened his heart against God (Exod. 7:13-14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 34-35); and (3) God then hardened Pharaoh's heart as further judgment and punishment (Exod. 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8).

According to Morris,

God's hardening follows on what Pharaoh himself did. His hardening always presupposes sin and is always part of the punishment of sin. God could kill the sinner immediately when he sinned, but he usually does not. But he shuts him up to the effect of his sin, so that the person who hardens himself is condemned to live as a hardened person. God does not harden people who do not go astray first (cf. Jas. 1:13).<sup>15</sup>

That this interpretation is fully in accord with the message of Romans is shown by its relationship to Paul's description of God's condemnation of pagans and moralists earlier in the epistle. In 1:24, 26, 28 Paul pronounces God's judicial "handing over" of idol-worshippers to a life of depravity and gross sin—a lifestyle that they had already chosen—so that they suffer the consequences of sin through their own choice. Then in chapter two he notes that the reason that

<sup>11</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 598; see also John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2:28-30.

<sup>12</sup> William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), 258.

<sup>13</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 361.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 510.

<sup>15</sup> Morris, *Romans*, 361.

God doesn't immediately punish sinners with death is that He gives them opportunities to repent (2:4).

In Romans 9:17 Paul cites Exodus 9:16 to the effect that God “raised up” Pharaoh to demonstrate His power in him. Could this choice of verb (ἐξήγειρα) indicate that God brought Pharaoh into existence to destroy him (created for destruction and hell)?<sup>16</sup> Though it has a wide range of meanings—to awaken from sleep, to raise from the dead, to raise up to a sitting position, to cause to appear—the vast majority of scholars agree that here it must refer here to God's placing Pharaoh in power, appointing him to a particular role in history through which God would be able to show His power and justice to the entire world.<sup>17</sup>

Paul's point throughout this section seems to be that God is entirely fair (especially toward Israel) in going beyond justice and offering mercy to some for His own gracious purposes, just as he gave mercy to Moses but hardened Pharaoh in his stubborn rebellion in order to demonstrate His power. Thus far we have not seen any specific reference to individual salvation since verse 3. The picture intensifies in the next paragraph.

#### Paul's Argument in Romans 9:19-21

Paul now depicts an imaginary (Jewish) objector taking issue with his logic. If God hardens some and gives mercy to others, how can God still punish those who disobey Him? Perhaps it's His will (βούλημα) for them to disobey. If God hardens those who resist Him, He must prefer resisters.

Paul meets this objection head-on, but not first by answering the questions. He argues that the questions are not legitimate, because man the creature has no right to ask them of God the creator. Alluding to several Old Testament illustrations of a potter and his clay (Isa. 29:16; 45:9-10; Jer. 18:1-11), Paul shows that no one has a right to answer back to God. He rebukes the irreverence of the questions. Morris notes that “unless the reader admits that man has no right to ask the kind of question he has suggested, he must conclude that the potter does not have the complete right to make out of his clay anything that suits his purpose.” But the potter has complete authority over his clay. In fact, the potter can even divide his clay in half, and make one half into fine pottery and the other half into a dish for the dog (Rom. 9:21).

Does this fact mean that it would be fair for God to create people simply to punish or destroy them? It is worth remembering that not even a human potter would create a pot simply to destroy it. But in actuality, Paul does not refer to any of these vessels being destroyed. His point is simply that God has the right to do what He wants with them.

A relevant question: Does God treat people like dirt (clay)? Paul never says so. He merely says that for a person to talk back to God and accuse Him of injustice is like a clay pot telling its maker he made a mistake in the way he made it.

---

<sup>16</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 509-10.

<sup>17</sup> See Moo, 595; Murray, 2:27; Morris, 360; C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 486.

Again we note that Paul says nothing in this section about individual election and salvation. The next verse begins to answer the question of God’s purpose and plan for some human vessels—specifically unbelieving Israel.

### Paul’s Argument in Romans 9:22

v. 22 - εἰ δὲ θέλων ὁ θεὸς ἐνδείξασθαι τὴν ὀργὴν καὶ γνωρίσαι τὸ δυνατόν αὐτοῦ ἤνεγκεν ἐν πολλῇ μακροθυμίᾳ σκευὴ ὀργῆς κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπώλειαν

Verse 22 begins with an “if” (protasis) that has no corresponding “then” (apodosis)—“but if God, willing . . .” The verse is notoriously difficult to translate, but most translators prefer to begin with “what if . . .”<sup>18</sup> Based on this uncompleted condition, the sentence contains four assertions:

- (1) God wills to demonstrate His wrath (against sinners?).
- (2) God wills to make His power known.
- (3) God endured “vessels of wrath” with much patience.
- (4) The “vessels of wrath” are prepared for destruction.

Since the participle θέλων is probably causal, perhaps the best translation of the verse is as follows: “But what if God, because He wanted to demonstrate His wrath and make His power known, bore [endured] with much patience the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?” The desire of God to demonstrate His wrath and power is probably an allusion back to the quotation in verse 17 concerning Pharaoh: “to demonstrate my power in you.”<sup>19</sup> God wants to show the world the reality of His power in judgment of those who rebel against Him. This will ultimately occur both at Christ’s second coming and at the final judgment (Rev. 20), but God has already shown His wrath and power throughout the history of Israel—both in Israel’s favor and against them (e.g., the Exodus, the Babylonian captivity, the return from exile, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans).

God has also endured the rebellious nation of Israel “with much patience” throughout their history—sending prophet after prophet to call the nation back from idolatry and spiritual adultery to faith and commitment to Himself (cf. Romans 10:21). Horst, however, thinks it unlikely that the reason for God’s patience in this context is to allow time for repentance. “The delay is simply to bring out more clearly what God already wills (θέλων) and knows, but what He allows to come to plain fulfillment in man. In no case, then, does μακροθυμία give the sinner a possibility of securing a claim on God’s goodness.”<sup>20</sup> Schreiner agrees, arguing that “God defers his immediate judgment of vessels of wrath so that he can unveil the full extent of his power and wrath on those who continually resist his offer of repentance (cf. 10:21).”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Cf. KJV, NKJV, NIV, NASB, NRSV, NAB; for a discussion of some translation issues in the passage, see Paul Ellingworth, “Translation and Exegesis: A Case Study (Rom 9,22ff.),” *Biblica* 59:3 (1978):396-402.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas H. Tobin, *Paul’s Rhetoric in Its Contexts: The Argument of Romans* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2004), 334.

<sup>20</sup> J. Horst, “μακροθυμία,” *TDNT* 4:382-83.

<sup>21</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 521; cf. Murray, 2:35.

But this interpretation appears to go contrary to the way God's patience is spoken of elsewhere. As noted above, Romans 2:4 states that God's patience and kindness are intended to lead sinners to repentance. Ephesians 2:3 shows that those who were "children of wrath" can become believers.

## The Lexical Content of Romans 9:22

We will now give specific attention to the three most crucial terms in 9:22.

### σκεύη ὀργῆς

This phrase has been variously interpreted as "vessels which deserve God's anger,"<sup>22</sup> vessels for the purpose of wrath,<sup>23</sup> vessels destined for wrath,<sup>24</sup> and "instruments of wrath."<sup>25</sup> Grammarians categorize ὀργῆς as a descriptive genitive<sup>26</sup> (thus, "vessels characterized by wrath") or a genitive of content ("vessels full of wrath")<sup>27</sup> or as "bearers of wrath."<sup>28</sup> According to Stählin, the metaphor derives from Jeremiah 27:25 (LXX): "The Lord has opened His treasury, and brought forth the weapons of His wrath [τὰ σκεύη ὀργῆς αὐτοῦ]; for the Lord God has a work in the land of the Chaldeans." He says that in the Greek Old Testament it means "the vessel whereby God executes His anger, while in the NT it means the vessel on which He executes it . . . the vessel into which His anger is poured so that it is wholly filled therewith and bound to fall victim to destruction."<sup>29</sup>

It appears that the vessels of wrath in Romans 9 are best identified as those (especially of Israel) who are destined to suffer God's wrath for sin. However, as Cranfield notes, this expression, "while indicating that those whom it denotes are indeed objects of God's wrath at the time in question, does not imply that they must always remain such."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, "it is God's purpose that the σκεύη ὀργῆς should become σκεύη ἐλέους" (vessels of mercy).

Some exegetes assume that the vessels of wrath must be foreordained for hell because of a supposed parallel with the "vessel for dishonor" deliberately made so in verse 21. However, if this were the case, Paul would probably have used anaphoric definite articles with both occurrences of σκεύη in verse 22.<sup>31</sup>

### ἀπώλειον

<sup>22</sup> Sanday and Headlam, 261.

<sup>23</sup> Murray, 2:33.

<sup>24</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 518.

<sup>25</sup> A. T. Hanson, "Vessels of Wrath or Instruments of Wrath? Romans IX. 22-3," *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 32 (1981): 433-43.

<sup>26</sup> A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 496; Nigel Turner, *Syntax* (vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*; ed. James H. Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 213.

<sup>27</sup> Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, trans. Joseph Smith (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1963), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 92.

<sup>29</sup> Gustav Stählin, "ὀργή," *TDNT* 5:435.

<sup>30</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:495.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, n. 4.

This word (the opposite of σωτηρία) is normally used by Paul to refer to final destruction and condemnation.<sup>32</sup> In Philippians 3:19 Paul uses it to refer to ungodly men who are self-serving and sensual, whose “end” is destruction. Paul uses these words to describe the ultimate destiny of the unsaved. Here in Romans 9:22 the vessels of wrath are bound for this end, just as in Matthew 7:13 the same destruction is waiting at the end of the broad way.

### κατηρτισμένα

Up to this point we have seen that the Calvinistic interpretation of Romans 9 has no claim to superiority, nor is reprobation directly taught anywhere in 9:1-21 or in the first part of 9:22. It is probably fair to say, however, that this word—normally translated “prepared” in this verse—is the locus of the primary argument for reprobation (double predestination) in Romans.

The verb καταρτιζω means to “put in order, restore, put into proper condition, complete, prepare, make, create.”<sup>33</sup> It is used in the active voice with God as subject and in the passive voice with God as agent (meaning “made” or “created for something”); it is also used in the middle voice with the meaning to “prepare something for someone,” and with a reflexive meaning “for oneself,” as in Matthew 21:16 (quoted from Ps. 8:3)—“you have prepared praise for yourself.”<sup>34</sup> Louw and Nida suggest three divisions of meanings: to “make adequate,” to “produce,” and to “create.” It can mean to make someone completely adequate or sufficient for something—“to make adequate, to furnish completely, to cause to be fully qualified”—or to cause to happen by means of some arrangement—“to produce, to arrange for, to cause to happen”—or to create, with the implication of putting into proper condition—“to create, to make.”<sup>35</sup> According to Delling, a better translation in Romans 9:22 is to “foreordain.” He asserts that the meaning “ready or ripe for destruction” has “no philological justification.”<sup>36</sup>

The form κατηρτισμένα is a perfect middle or passive participle. The debate between Calvinistic and non-Calvinistic interpretations hinges on whether the participle is in the middle or passive voice. If the voice is passive, then the vessels of wrath were prepared by someone (other than themselves) for destruction. If it is middle, it becomes possible that the vessels prepared themselves, reflexively. Let’s look at the evidence for both views.

Passive voice. Rosscup gives four reasons to take the passive view: (1) Verse 18 says that God hardened Pharaoh; He must also have prepared the unbelieving vessels for destruction. (2) God must be the potter who prepares vessels (cf. v. 21). (3) God is clearly the one who

<sup>32</sup> See Philippians 1:28; 3:19. The cognate verb ἀπόλλυμι has a similar reference (see Rom. 2:12; 1 Cor. 1:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3).

<sup>33</sup> Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 417-18.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:680; 1:163; 1:514.

<sup>36</sup> Gerhard Delling, “καταρτίζω,” *TDNT* 1:476.

prepares some for glory (v. 23); He must also be the one who prepares others for non-glory. (4) God prepared specific people for destinies (cf. 1 Thess. 5:9; 1 Pet. 2:8; Rev. 13:8).<sup>37</sup>

Zemek asserts that if the passive view is not held, “Paul’s whole illustration of the sovereign potter falls to the ground.”<sup>38</sup> Of course, this assumes that the “vessels of wrath” image is derived directly from the “vessel unto dishonor” reference in verse 21. Based on this same assumption, White says,

Why are there vessels prepared for destruction? Because God is free. Think about it: there are only three logical possibilities here. Either 1) all “vessels” are prepared for glory (universalism); 2) all “vessels” are prepared for destruction; or 3) some vessels are prepared for glory and some are prepared for destruction and it is *the Potter* who decides which are which. Why is there no fourth option, one in which the pots prepare themselves based upon their own choice? Because pots don’t have such a capacity! Pots are pots! Since God wishes to make known the “riches of His grace” to His elect people (the vessels prepared of mercy), there *must* be vessels prepared for destruction.<sup>39</sup>

Several other arguments have been made: (1) The middle voice is rare in the New Testament, while the passive is common. (2) The context puts an emphasis on God’s sovereignty and freedom, not human agency.<sup>40</sup>

Middle voice. Paul says specifically that God prepared the vessels of mercy for glory, but he apparently deliberately does not say this about the vessels of wrath. God is said to have “endured with patience” the vessels of wrath, indicating that they were working against God, thus preparing themselves for judgment through disobedience. The “whoever” in Romans 10:11-13 (“whoever calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved”) must also apply to the vessels of wrath in 9:22; human responses are important in determining destinies. The Bible says that people must believe in order to be saved (John 3:16-19), and those who do not are condemned (Rom. 10:3-4). Jeremiah 19:11 describes the breaking of a clay vessel representing God’s judgment of Israel, which prepared itself for destruction by refusing to repent.<sup>41</sup>

Morris concludes that “the difference in construction from the next verse (the passive over against the active, the participle against the indicative, the absence here of anything equivalent to the prefix for ‘before’) makes it probable that we should not think of God as doing this. Rather the people did it themselves, perhaps, as Hendriksen thinks, with some help from Satan.”<sup>42</sup>

<sup>37</sup> James E. Rosscup, “Paul’s Concept of Eternal Punishment,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 9:2 (1998): 177.

<sup>38</sup> George J. Zemek, *A Biblical Theology of the Doctrines of Sovereign Grace* (Little Rock, Ark.: B.T.D.S.G., 2002), 156, n. 762.

<sup>39</sup> White, *Freedom*, 214.

<sup>40</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 521-22.

<sup>41</sup> Rosscup, “Paul’s Concept,” 177.

<sup>42</sup> Morris, 368; William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 328. See also James R. Edwards, *Romans*, NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 241; John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994), 272; W. H. Griffith Thomas, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 261; William Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse* (Chicago: Moody, 1938), 374.

Chrysostom, who knew Greek better than we all, also interpreted this word as a middle voice, explaining it as a reflexive—“they prepared themselves for destruction.”<sup>43</sup>

### The Syntax of **κατηρτισμένα**

Daniel Wallace objects strongly to the middle voice interpretation of **κατηρτισμένα**. I will quote him at length before I discuss the syntax of this form.

The middle view has little to commend it. First, grammatically, the direct middle is quite rare and is used almost exclusively in certain idiomatic expressions, especially where the verb is used consistently with such a notion (as in the verbs for putting on clothes). This is decidedly not the case with **καταρτίζω**: nowhere else in the NT does it occur as a direct middle. Second, in the perfect tense, the middle-passive form is always to be taken as a passive in the NT (Luke 6:40; 1 Cor 1:10; Heb 11:3)—a fact that, in the least, argues against an idiomatic use of this verb as a direct middle. Third, the lexical nuance of **καταρτίζω**, coupled with the perfect tense, suggests something of a “done deal.” Although some commentators suggest that the verb means that the vessels are *ready* for destruction, both the lexical nuance of complete preparation and the grammatical nuance of the perfect tense are against this. Fourth, the context argues strongly for a passive and completed notion. In v 20 the vessel is shaped by God’s will, not its own (‘Will that which is molded say to its maker, “Why have you made me this way?”’). In v 21, Paul asks a question with **οὐκ** (thus expecting a positive answer): Is not the destiny of the vessels (one for honor, one for dishonor) entirely predetermined by their Creator? Verse 22 is the answer to that question. To argue, then, that **κατηρτισμένα** is a direct middle seems to fly in the face of grammar (the normal use of the voice and tense), lexeme, and context.<sup>44</sup>

My brief responses to Wallace’s objections are as follows: First, it is true that the direct middle is rare in the NT. However, Wallace includes many examples in his *Syntax* that are one of a kind for that lexeme; in fact, the first example in his direct middle list is only used once in the entire NT; we don’t determine function by probability, but by context.

Second, I believe Wallace is mistaken when he says that the perfect middle-passive form of **καταρτίζω** is always to be taken as a passive in the NT. He lists three passages, of which one is 1 Corinthians 1:10—

Παρακαλῶ δὲ ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, διὰ τοῦ ὀνόματος τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ἵνα τὸ αὐτὸ λέγητε πάντες καὶ μὴ ἦ ἐν ὑμῖν σχίσματα, ἦτε δὲ **κατηρτισμένοι** ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ νοῦ καὶ ἐν τῇ αὐτῇ γνώμῃ.

<sup>43</sup> Chrysostom *Homilies on Romans* 16.

<sup>44</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 418. Wallace adds in footnote 28: “The verb occurs 13 times in the NT, seven as a middle or passive form. Of those seven, two are definitely middle, being aorist (Matt 21:16; Heb 10:5), and both are obviously indirect middles. The other four (Rom. 9:22 being excluded from the count) are all almost surely passive (Luke 6:40; 1 Cor. 1:10; 2 Cor. 13:11; Heb 11:3).

“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be **made complete** in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (NASB)

This is the same form as in Romans 9:22 (perfect middle/passive participle), except for gender and case. Here are the NIV and NKJV translations of 1 Corinthians 1:10:

“I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be **perfectly united** in mind and thought.” (NIV)

“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and [that] there be no divisions among you, but [that] you be **perfectly joined together** in the same mind and in the same judgment.” (NKJV)

Notice how these translations have removed the passive idea that is present in the NASB. In fact, these versions contain a virtual direct middle translation of the verb: To be “perfectly united together” is virtually the same as “making yourself complete” (reflexive).

Third, we will see below that, outside the New Testament, many occurrences of this same form are commonly translated “fully equipped.” This is not far from the “ready” or “fitted” translation that Wallace rejects for Romans 9:22. His argument that the idea of a “done deal” or “complete preparation” rules out a reflexive or “self-prepared sinner” (my words) interpretation seems weak to me.

Fourth, the context only argues strongly for a passive notion if one presupposes reprobation and a deterministic approach to God’s sovereignty in Romans 9. I have tried to show that such an interpretation is neither necessary nor likely. As Hanson notes, “We do not need to conclude that God previously chose them to be the objects of his wrath: by their unbelief they choose themselves.”<sup>45</sup>

### κατηρτίσμενος outside the New Testament

The perfect middle/passive participle of *καταρτίζω* is found 35 times in Greek literature from the third century B.C. to the third century A.D. I was not able to retrieve all of them, but what I found is very instructive. Note the following examples.

#### Polybius - Histories

150 B.C.

Hist 1.59.7

κατὰ γὰρ τὰς τῶν βίων εὐκαιρίας καθ’ ἓνα καὶ δύο καὶ τρεῖς ὑφίσταντο παρέξειν πεντήρη **κατηρτισμένην**, ἐφ’ ᾧ τὴν δαπάνην κομιοῦνται, κατὰ λόγον

---

<sup>45</sup> Hanson, “Vessels of Wrath,” 441.

τῶν πραγμάτων προχωρησάντων.

as either one, two, or three of them, according to their means, undertook to provide a quinquereme **fully equipped** on the understanding that they would be repaid if all went well.<sup>46</sup>

Hist 5.89.8

χωρὶς δὲ πεντήρεις μὲν δέκα **κατηρτισμένας**, σίτου δ' εἴκοσι μυριάδας, καὶ μὴν ξύλων καὶ ῥητίνης καὶ τριχὸς μυριάδας πηχῶν καὶ ταλάντων χιλιάδας.

presented them with ten quinqueremes **fully equipped**, two hundred thousand medimni of corn<sup>47</sup>

Hist 14.10.10

τὸν δὲ τῶν ὑπεναντίων στόλον ἐξ ὅλου τοῦ χειμῶνος πρὸς αὐτὸ τοῦτο **κατηρτισμένον**, τὸ μὲν ἀντανάγεσθαι καὶ ναυ-μαχεῖν ἀπογνοῦς

while the enemy's fleet **had** during the whole winter **been equipping** for this very purpose<sup>48</sup>

Diodorus Siculus - Histories

30 B.C.

12.33.2

καὶ ἐψηφίσατο συμμαχεῖν Κερκυραίοις. διὸ καὶ πα-ραχρήμα μὲν ἐξέπεμψαν τριήρεις **κατηρτισμένας** δέκα

Consequently they dispatched at once ten **fully equipped** triremes<sup>49</sup>

12.33.3

ἔχοντες οὖν ναῦς **κατηρτισμένας** ἑκατὸν πενήκοντα, καὶ στρατηγούς ἐλόμενοι τοὺς χαριε-στάτους, ἀνήχθησαν ἐπὶ τὴν Κέρκυραν, κεκρικότες

With, therefore, one hundred and fifty **fully equipped** triremes and after selecting their most accomplished generals<sup>50</sup>

19.62.8

κατήγαγε σκάφη Διοσκουρίδης ὀγδοήκοντα. προὔπηρχον δ' αὐτῷ **κατηρτισμέναι** ναῦς τῶν ἐν Φοι-νίκῃ

<sup>46</sup> Polybius, *Hist.* 1.59.7 (Paton, LCL).

<sup>47</sup> Polybius, *Hist.* 5.89.8 (Paton, LCL).

<sup>48</sup> Polybius, *Hist.* 14.10.10 (Paton, LCL).

<sup>49</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 12.33.2 (Oldfather, LCL).

<sup>50</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 12.33.3 (Oldfather, LCL).

The first to be finished of the ships that had been made in Phoenicia were also at hand **fully equipped**.<sup>51</sup>

If one looks carefully at these excerpts from Hellenistic literature (within 200 years before Paul), one will discover that the form, structure, and syntax of these occurrences of *κατηρτίσμενος* are very similar to what we find in Romans 9:22. Most of them are adjectival in function. What would happen if we translated the form in 9:22 in a similar fashion—“vessels of wrath fully equipped for destruction”? Who did the equipping? These excerpts don’t say. We assume that the people on the ships did the equipping. That is not far from the concept of being “ready” for battle—in the case of Romans 9, ready or “outfitted” for destruction.

## Conclusion

I close with some of Chrysostom’s teaching on this passage:

Pharaoh was a vessel of wrath, that is, a man who by his own hard-heartedness had kindled the wrath of God. For after enjoying much long-suffering, he became no better, but remained unimproved. Wherefore he calls him not only “a vessel of wrath,” but also one “fitted for destruction.” That is, fully fitted indeed, but by his own proper self. For neither had God left out aught of the things likely to recover him, nor did he leave out aught of those that would ruin him, and put him beyond any forgiveness. Yet still, though God knew this, “He endured him with much long-suffering,” being willing to bring him to repentance. For had He not willed this, then He would not have been thus long-suffering. But as he would not use the long-suffering in order to repentance, but fully fitted himself for wrath, He used him for the correction of others.<sup>52</sup>

Even Calvinists recognize the difficulty of combining the logic of reprobation with Scripture. W. C. Campbell-Jack says that “we have at best reduced the Almighty from the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ to the level of the priest and the Levite who passed by on the other side. Further, the Christ who wept over Jerusalem (Luke 13:34) becomes a hypocrite for he has already decreed from all eternity that Jerusalem would not come to him, that he had previously decided to leave them in their lost condition, or even hardened their hearts against himself (Rom. 9:18).”<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Hist.* 19.62.8 (Geer, LCL).

<sup>52</sup> Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans* 16.

<sup>53</sup> W. C. Campbell-Jack, “Prolegomena for Reprobation,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 61:1 (1989):42.