

Election and Israel: Following Paul's Thought Through Romans 9-11

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**Abstract**

Paul's dealings with Israel in Romans 9-11 have long been viewed as some of the most theologically controversial teachings in the New Testament. Throughout these three critical chapters located in the middle of his greatest theological treatise, Paul teaches both on the doctrine of individual election and on the future of ethnic Israel. In this paper, the text will be approached using the discipline of biblical theology with the hope of interpreting the text using a literal hermeneutic with the whole of Scripture in mind. The doctrine of unconditional individual election will be affirmed by this research, and both a progressive covenantal and dispensationalist understanding of Israel's national future will be presented separately.

## **Election and Israel: Following Paul's Thought Through Romans 9-11**

### **Introduction**

In what is arguably the greatest treatise of systematic theology ever written, Paul's letter to the Romans details the doctrines of total depravity, justification, and sanctification, while explaining God's relationship with national Israel and offering practical instructions for Christian living. In this doctrinally dense letter, there is perhaps no more controversial section than Romans 9-11, where Paul addresses God's sovereign purposes in electing the nation of Israel. The two primary points of argument when interpreting these three chapters are God's role in predestinating some to salvation and God's future plans for national Israel under the New Covenant. Calvinists and Arminians have long debated the use of the word "predestined" in Romans 9, while dispensationalists and covenant theologians have long debated Israel's future as depicted in Romans 11. The aim of this exegetical paper is to closely investigate Romans 9-11 within context, ultimately arguing in favor of the doctrine of single-predestination and presenting both a progressive covenantal and dispensationalist understanding of God's plan for national Israel.

### **Passage Summary**

In Romans 9-11, the apostle Paul tackles the issue of ethnic Israel in anticipation of his Jewish audience's questions regarding their nation's future. The apostle first gives an explanation of God's sovereign choice in Israel's past election in Romans 9:1-29. Then, in Romans 9:30-10:21, Paul describes Israel's present rejection of faith in Christ and current need for the Gospel. The apostle then pivots to discuss God's sovereign plan for Israel's future salvation in Romans 11:1-36. To conclude, Paul praises God's riches in wisdom and knowledge

in Romans 11:33-36. While this section of Paul's letter to the Romans may seem out of place coming out of Romans 1-8, it is in fact crucial when Paul's purpose in writing the letter is understood.

### **History of Interpretation**

#### **Early Gnosticism / Predestinarian**

The theological implications of these three chapters have been debated for centuries, with certain stances gaining more traction across different time periods. To begin with, the issue of predestination in Romans 9 has been hotly debated since as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century with Origen and Irenaeus' writings against the Gnostics. The Gnostics infamously saw all things as being either pneumatic, meaning 'spiritual,' or non-pneumatic, meaning 'non-spiritual.' Origen himself states the Gnostic understanding of Romans 9, that "a happier lot by birth is the case with some rather than with others."<sup>1</sup> A scholar named John Moon explains the Gnostic's thought here, stating that "these gnostic Christians held that Isaac and Jacob were predestined for blessing because they were born with pneumatic natures, while Ishmael and Esau were rejected because of their non-pneumatic natures."<sup>2</sup> Because of their presuppositions regarding the pneumatic and non-pneumatic nature of all things, the Gnostics held to a wholly predestinarian reading of Romans 9 where human salvation was determined by the pneumatic nature that they were born with.

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<sup>1</sup> Origen, and John Behr. *Origen: On First Principles*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019. 291.

<sup>2</sup> Moon, John. "A History of Interpretation of Romans 9:6-13 in the Patristic Period." Open Collections. University of British Columbia, January 1, 1970. Last modified January 1, 1970.

**Origen and Irenaeus / Foreknowledge**

Origen and Irenaeus took issue with this understanding of the text, with Irenaeus arguing that Jacob and Esau were merely representative of both Israel and the church instead of all men.<sup>3</sup> Israel, represented by Esau, was the original inheritor of his father's blessing only to lose this blessing to Jacob, who represented the Gentiles, as a result of his foolishness. With this understanding of the text, Irenaeus affirmed God's foreknowledge while refuting a predestinarian view of God. He explained the logical end of this interpretation when addressing Paul's statement on Pharaoh, stating, "God, knowing the number of those who will not believe, since he foreknows all things, has given them over to unbelief. . . leaving them in the darkness which they have chosen for themselves."<sup>4</sup> Here, foreknowledge is understood as God's prior awareness of choices that were independently made by those rejected the word of the Lord. In God's foresight, He gives some over to the sin and darkness in which they themselves have chosen. It is with a similar understanding of God's foreknowledge that Origen too rejects the Gnostic understanding of predestination.<sup>5</sup>

**Manichaeism and Nicene Christianity**

A couple hundred years later, a similar debate on the free will of man would ensue between the Nicene Christians and the Manichaeans. Similarly to the Gnostics, the Manichaeans viewed the human condition as dualistic, having essentially good souls imprisoned by a dark

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<sup>3</sup> Moon, John. "A History of Interpretation of Romans 9:6-13 in the Patristic Period." Open Collections. University of British Columbia, January 1, 1970. Last modified January 1, 1970.

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus. *Irenaeus Against Heresies*. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2007. 502.

<sup>5</sup> Origen, and John Behr. *Origen: On First Principles*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019. 291.

power. They believed that God had to act unilaterally to awaken the good essence within an individual to his or her restored self. Because of this, the Manichaeans affirmed a staunch predestinarian view of God. On this issue, John Moon states that “it appears that Ambrosiaster, Jerome, [early] Augustine, and Pelagius, in their comments on [Romans] 9:6-13, argued explicitly against the Manichaean idea that some humans are created with an evil nature that predestines them for destruction.”<sup>6</sup> While there are obviously significant differences in the theologies of Ambrosiaster, Jerome, early Augustine, and Pelagius, each of them still allowed for free-will by appealing to God’s foreknowledge.

### **Augustine’s Fluctuating Interpretations**

Notably, in Augustine’s *To Simplician*, the African theologian takes a significant turn in his interpretation of Romans 9 by affirming God’s sovereignty over who would come to saving faith. Moon explains the key element of Augustine’s new interpretation to be “a God defined in terms of absolute power, who, unlike the Manichaean God, flawlessly and irresistibly achieves salvation and creates cosmic order by choosing some and rejecting others.”<sup>7</sup> Addressing the cause of this shift, religious historian Jason BeDuhn explains that “in previous studies of Augustine, his sudden shift in thinking has been attributed variously to his own conversion experience or darkening introspection, to the text of Paul itself forcing certain readings upon

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<sup>6</sup> Moon, John. “A History of Interpretation of Romans 9:6-13 in the Patristic Period.” *Open Collections*. University of British Columbia, January 1, 1970. Last modified January 1, 1970.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

him, or to the inexorable logic of his commitment to divine omnipotence.”<sup>8</sup> Regardless of its true cause, Augustine’s shift in interpretation led to accusations of Manichaean influence on his thinking. While many theologians believe that Augustine arrived at this new conclusion by faithfully submitting himself to the original text of Romans 9, others argue that such a conclusion neglects the fact that he was in constant conversation with his Manichaean opponents.<sup>9</sup> With regards to his thirty-year struggle to understand the sovereignty of God in relation to the free-will of man in Romans 9, Augustine himself believes that he “strove on behalf of the free choice of the human will, but God’s grace conquered.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Calvin and Arminius**

The last significant historical debate on the interpretation of Romans 9 to be overviewed here is perhaps the most famed- that of James Arminius and John Calvin. Calvin, the father of perhaps the most influential theological system in recent history, argues strongly in favor of a predestinating God in his commentary on Romans 9:

We have then the whole stability of our election enclosed in the purpose of God alone: here merits avail nothing, as they issue in nothing but death; no worthiness is regarded, for there is none; but the goodness of God reigns alone. False then is the dogma, and contrary to God’s word, — that God elects or rejects, as he foresees each to be worthy or unworthy of his favor.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> BeDuhn, Jason. *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010. 281.

<sup>9</sup> Moon, John. “A History of Interpretation of Romans 9:6-13 in the Patristic Period.” *Open Collections*. University of British Columbia, January 1, 1970. Last modified January 1, 1970.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine. *The Revisions Volume 1*. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2010. 110.

<sup>11</sup> Calvin, John. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Classic Reprint)*. London, England: FORGOTTEN Books, 2016.



Similarly to Augustine, Calvin saw God as the active agent in the prenatal election of Jacob and Esau, as well as the active agent in the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Regarding Pharaoh's hardening, Calvin explains that the Hebrew word for raising up Pharaoh "...affirms that his fury had been foreseen by him, and that he had prepared means for restraining it, but that he had also thus designedly ordained it, and indeed for this end, — that he might exhibit a more illustrious evidence of his own power."<sup>12</sup> Arminius famously took issue with this seemingly unjust understanding of God's sovereignty, proclaiming in his letter on Romans 9 that "if no one can resist the will of God, then He cannot justly find fault with those, whom He hardeneth according to that will."<sup>13</sup> Similarly to Origen and the Nicene Christians, Arminius more eloquently appeals to God's foreknowledge and justice in electing those who chose to place faith in Christ Jesus. Unlike Calvin, Arminius views God's hardening of Pharaoh as performed on the basis of Pharaoh's past sins, ultimately keeping Pharaoh alone responsible for his sins. Because of their thorough and insightful engagement with the text, the writings of both Calvin and Arminius on Romans 9 have had a lasting impact on the post-reformation theological community.

### **Interpreting Israel's Salvation**

More recently, theologians have been engaged in a different debate over how to interpret the future of national Israel as presented in Romans 11. Specifically, Romans 11:25-27, where Paul proclaims that all of Israel shall be saved, has caused a great deal of controversy between dispensationalists and covenant theologians. The covenant theology camp argues that the

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<sup>12</sup> Calvin, John. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (Classic Reprint)*. London, England: FORGOTTEN Books, 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Arminius, James. "Arminius on Romans 9." *Learn Theology*. Accessed 2021.

salvation being referenced here either applies to ‘spiritual Israel’ or refers to a mass conversation of Jews nearing the end times. On this matter, prominent covenant theologian R.C. Sproul states, “I believe Paul to be saying that the full completement of God’s elect from Israel will be saved and that this will come in a new redemptive-historical visitation by the Holy Spirit when the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled.”<sup>14</sup> This position is in opposition to a newer and more recently popularized reading by dispensationalist theologians that see Israel’s salvation as the national restoration of ethnic Israel. Outspoken dispensationalist John MacArthur explains that “after Israel is temporarily set aside, God will gather Gentile believers for Himself, then He will restore and reclaim His ancient people Israel and finally He will establish His glorious kingdom on earth”<sup>15</sup> These two readings of Romans 11 differ in their understanding of Paul’s usage of the terms ‘Israel’ and ‘saved,’ leading each theologian to vastly different conclusions regarding Israel’s national future. While there are numerous other interpretations of this text, the three discussed here are most prominent in today’s theological conversation. Addressing this debate, Dr. Philip La Grange Du Toit states, “One of the most important questions that apply to all... views of Rom 11:25–27 is whether Paul envisions ‘Israel’ to continue as a separate entity apart from believers in Christ after the Christ-event.”<sup>16</sup> This research will attempt to accurately identify Paul’s intent in referring to ‘Israel’ as he develops his theology of the nation’s future in Romans 9-11.

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<sup>14</sup> Sproul, RC. *The Righteous Shall Live by Faith: Romans*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009. 387.

<sup>15</sup> MacArthur, John. *Romans 9-16*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994. 129.

<sup>16</sup> Du Toit, Philip. “The Salvation of ‘All Israel’ in Romans 11:25–27 as the Salvation of Inner-Elect, Historical Israel in Christ.” *Researchgate.net*. Last modified January 2015.

### Purpose of Study

With an excess of study already in print regarding these three theologically dense chapters, this research aims to concisely follow Paul's thought from the beginning of his discussion on Israel all the way through his hopeful conclusion in chapter 11. The text will be addressed through the lens of biblical theology, a discipline that aims to look at a text literally and locally while acknowledging its place in the unfolding biblical metanarrative.<sup>17</sup> Brian Rosner explains that through the lens of biblical theology, a text is to be interpreted "with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyze and synthesize the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching narrative and Christocentric focus."<sup>18</sup> Using this interpretive framework, Roman's 9-11 will be approached in a section-by-section manner so that Paul's continuous thought can easily be traced. Not all textual details will be addressed, with priority being given to following Paul's theology of election and Israel.

Regarding the two theological controversies previously addressed in the history of interpretation section, clear theological conclusions will be drawn from the text. A reformed understanding of Paul's theology of election will be presented, while Beza's doctrine of double predestination will be rejected in Romans 9. Additionally, the national future of Israel will be addressed through the lens of progressive covenantalism, a form of covenant theology that more readily acknowledges dispensational thinking. Progressive covenantalism, first made popular by

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<sup>17</sup> Biblical theology aims to read texts using a literal hermeneutic. Additionally, the biblical theologian emphasizes immediate the context of a passage so not to force theological systems or categories onto the passage.

<sup>18</sup> Wellum, Stephen. *God's Kingdom through God's Covenants: a Concise Biblical Theology*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015. 22.

Steven Wellum and Peter Gentry's *Kingdom Through Covenant*, sees Israel in Romans 11 as a distinct ethnic people.<sup>19</sup> It does not, however, see Israel's salvation as presented in Romans 11 as calling for the national restoration of ethnic Israel. The dispensationalist approach to this text, which sees national Israel being fully restored, will be acknowledged as a legitimate alternative conclusion. This research aims to humbly approach Romans 9-11 with the hope that the text itself will be the primary informant of any stated theological conclusions, resisting the temptation to unjustly force theological systems onto the text itself.

### **Textual Backgrounds**

Before Romans 9-11 can be properly interpreted, Paul's reason for writing his letter to the Romans must first be established and the positioning of this section within the letter as a whole must be identified. To begin with, Paul is writing from Corinth while on his 3<sup>rd</sup> missionary journey to "all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints," according to Romans 1:7.<sup>20</sup> By addressing the letter to "those called as saints" instead of "to the churches in Rome," Paul makes this introduction distinct from some of his other letters. This is likely intentional, being that Paul is attempting to unify both Roman Jews and Gentiles into one community equally called and loved by God. Dr. Smith of Liberty University explains that Priscilla, Aquila, and the 'kinsmen' mentioned in chapter 16 indicate that there was a legitimate Jewish presence in the Roman church.<sup>21</sup> However, due to the fact that Rome was a primarily Gentile city, there were

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<sup>19</sup> Gentry, Peter John, and Stephen J. Wellum. *Kingdom Through Covenant: a Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the New American Standard Version (La Habra, CA: Lockman, 2005).

<sup>21</sup> Smith, Michael J., "BIBL 425, Romans" (unpublished class notes, Liberty University, Fall 2018).

undoubtedly Gentiles in the church, most likely outnumbering the ethnic Jews. The mixed demographic of the Roman church could very likely have caused ethnic tensions between Jews and Gentiles, which is significant when identifying Paul's purpose in writing the letter. While some scholars believe Paul could have been defending his own ministry, preparing for the possibility that he would never make it to Rome, or writing a theodicy when addressing the Romans, Bush and Smith present a compelling alternative for Paul's purpose in writing.<sup>22</sup> Bush argues that Romans was written to address tension between the Jewish and Gentile members of the Church in Rome by revealing that God's salvation plan for man was the same for everyone.<sup>23</sup> This view is supported by the general trend in the early church of Gentiles being inconsiderate towards their Jewish brothers and sisters, as well as the fact that Paul is very intentional about explaining how the righteous purposes of God are fulfilled in Christ Jesus for each group. Additionally, this purpose in writing would further explain the seemingly random insertion of Romans 9-11, dealing with God's purposes for Israel, in the middle of the letter. As Bush explains, "The disunity between Jew and Gentile provided a definite reason for Paul's writing to Rome. In addition, this interpretation gives a crucial place to chapters 9-11 in the argument."<sup>24</sup> Without having legitimate cause to address the future of ethnic Israel, this section of the letter makes little sense.

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<sup>22</sup> Smith, Michael J., "BIBL 425, Romans" (unpublished class notes, Liberty University, Fall 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Bush, Louis K. "An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 6:6." Th.M. Thesis. Dallas Theological Seminary, 1978.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

As with most of Paul's letters, Romans begins with a greeting section to the Roman church where Paul thanks God for the faith of the church members.<sup>25</sup> Shortly after, Paul delivers the theme verses for the entire letter in Romans 1:16-17, stating, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written: 'But the righteous one will live by faith.'" Paul intentionally makes it clear that both Jews and Gentiles alike are made righteous by faith in the powerful gospel of God. He goes on in Romans 1:18-3:20 to explain the condemned state of all of mankind, again choosing to detail distinctly that both Gentiles and Jews are lost in sin without Christ. In Romans 3:21-5:21, Paul explains how God imputes His righteousness to men in providing justification by faith alone. In Romans 4 specifically, Paul demonstrates the Old Testament precedent for justification by faith alone, perhaps in an attempt to combat the teachings of Judiazers. Directly following, in Romans 6:1-8:39, Paul details the doctrine of progressive sanctification and the active work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the redeemed. Both Jews and Gentiles are presented as equally indwelt with the Holy Spirit, just as they were equally condemned without Christ and equally justified by faith in His work. Paul concludes this demonstration of the Gospel with a deeply encouraging teaching on the security of the believer in Romans 8. Paul pivots into his discussion on the nation of Israel in Romans 9 in anticipation of questions from the Jewish portion of his audience following Paul's teaching on the security of God's people. After hearing of the equal standing each group now bears in Christ, it would make sense for the Jewish audience to question if the word of God had failed in keeping the covenants He had first made exclusively with the nation of Israel. If

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<sup>25</sup> See Paul's introductions in Romans, Ephesians, Colossians, 1, 2 Thessalonians, and Philemon.

Paul's teachings on the security of the believer in Romans 8 are true, then how could God's elect people have been rejected? Additionally, why would it be that the Church was increasingly Gentile while the majority of Israel remained hardened? It is consistent with Paul's writing style in Romans to anticipate these responses from his audience, commonly using a literary tool known as a diatribe to combat opponents of his teaching.<sup>26</sup> Because of this, Romans 9-11 will be read as a three-chapter response to anticipated questions of national and ethnic election from both Jews and Gentiles alike in the Roman church after hearing of their equal standing in the justification and sanctification sections of Paul's letter.

### **Romans 9-11**

#### **Romans 9:1-5 / Anguish Over Israel**

Romans 9:1-5 serves almost as a preface to the intense doctrinal section to follow regarding Israel's rejection. In these five verses, Paul pivots from the joys of Romans 8 into an "unceasing grief" in his heart. Bible commentator Alva J. McClain states that "it is possible for the redeemed heart to be full of unspeakable joy, and at the same time have sorrow. In chapter eight Paul is up in the heavens... and in the next moment he is telling us that he has great sorrow and heaviness of heart."<sup>27</sup> If Romans 9-11 is being read as a response to the anticipated questions of Paul's Jewish audience, then verses 1-5 first offer Paul's heartfelt sympathies to Jews heartbroken over their nation's rejection. Paul's preface that he is "telling the truth in Christ" in verse 1 foreshadows the seemingly harsh doctrine he is about to deliver regarding Israel's

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<sup>26</sup> Moo, Douglas J. *Encountering the Book of Romans: a Theological Survey*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> McClain, Alva J., and Herman A. Hoyt. *Romans: the Gospel of God's Grace: the Lectures of Alva J. McClain*. Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1989. 196.

election and rejection. Paul desires that his Jewish audience members would understand that the truth he is about to deliver is accompanied by a heart that longs for the salvation of the Israelites, so much so that Paul would wish himself accursed for the sake of his kinsmen.

Notably, the apostle decides to describe the Israelites in verse 4 as those “to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple services and the promises.” After spending the previous 8 chapters promoting the equality of both the Jews and Gentiles, this list of exclusive Jewish prerogatives intentionally honors God’s election of the nation. Bible commentator Colin Kruse explains, “These verses contain a unique list of the privileges of Israel as God’s people, one without parallel in Jewish literature, and therefore probably of Paul’s own compilation.”<sup>28</sup> Regardless of the list’s origins, it is clear here that Paul is exhorting the nation of Israel for all that God has entrusted her. Some scholars even see this list as Paul’s reasoning behind wishing himself accursed for the nation’s sake. Romans Expert Douglas Moo believes that “we are justified in suggesting a causal relationship between verses 4-5 and verse 3.”<sup>29</sup> Using these five transitional verses, Paul makes it abundantly clear that he deeply loves the nation of Israel and is heartbroken over her hardening. In doing so, he prepares his audience to receive the difficult truth of God’s sovereignty over the nation’s partial rejection.

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<sup>28</sup> Kruse, Colin G. *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012. 370.

<sup>29</sup> Moo, Douglas J. *Romans*. Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1991. 560.



**Romans 9:6-13 / God's Sovereign Choice**

In verses 6-9 of this section, Paul explains that simply because a partial hardening has come over ethnic Israel, God's covenants with His people have not failed. Here, he makes plainly clear that God's chosen people is no longer exclusively ethnic Israel, stating in verse 8, "That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants." Paul is explaining here that under the New Covenant, the children of God are now those who share in the promises of the gospel and not simply those who are of Jewish descent. As reformed theologian William Hendriksen states, "So the apostle explains that although a marvelous promise had indeed been made to Israel, that promise was never meant to be realized in the entire nation but, only in the true Israel."<sup>30</sup> With the majority of ethnic Israel rejecting Christ's kingship, only the faithful remnant are truly inheritors of the promise. Hendriksen goes on, "It is important to point out that although the statement 'For not all who are of Israel are Israel' is cast in a negative mold, the positive implication is, 'There is, indeed, a true Israel. God's rejection of Israel is not total or complete.'<sup>31</sup> God's promises and covenants with His people still stand, albeit not in the way that rejected Israel had anticipated.

Paul appeals to the Scriptures to support his teaching on true Israel using the example of Jacob and Esau. In Romans 9:11, Paul explains why Jacob was elected specially by God: "For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls." It seems clear here that God is the active agent in Jacob's election before he had produced

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<sup>30</sup> Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Romans Chapters 9-16*. Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d. 317.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

any good works in the sight of the Lord or of man. While attempts to appeal to the foreknowledge of God here might solve humanistic philosophical dilemmas regarding the justice of God, none can deny that Paul's language indicates that God himself is the 'one who calls.' The word used to describe God here is *καλοῦντος*, a present, active, participle indicating that the God who called Jacob in Genesis is the same God who calls today. On this calling, R.C. Sproul states, "The decree was issued according to the purpose of God so that His purpose would be exalted.<sup>32</sup> and established. His purpose is the ground of election." With God's own character and purpose serving as the sole basis for election in the Old Testament, it would make sense that God, for His sovereign purposes, has chosen to elect some out of national Israel for His mercy while passing over others. Just as Esau was born out of the same bloodline as Jacob, yet passed over in God's perfect purposes in election, so too has unregenerate Israel been born of favorable flesh yet passed over in God's sovereignty. It is in this way that Paul's comments on the election of Jacob contributes towards his overall point regarding the rejection of unregenerate ethnic Israel. It is not ethnic status that deems one a member of true Israel, but the mercy of God in calling sinners into His kingdom.

While this section is dealing directly with God's election of spiritual Israel, it can similarly be applied to election on an individual level. Notably, the two Old Testament examples Paul cites as evidence of God's electing hand for salvation deal with individuals, namely Isaac and Jacob. To argue that this text cannot be used as support for the doctrine of individual election would be to ignore the nature of Paul's two scriptural examples. Additionally, Bible

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<sup>32</sup> Sproul, R.C. *The Righteous Shall Live by Faith: Romans*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009.

commentator Colin Kruse points out that “election of individuals, which is criticized as an arbitrary choice on God’s part, is in fact no more arbitrary than the election of communities.”<sup>33</sup> The same God who at one time elected Israel on the basis of His divine purposes alone similarly has elected some in Christ for these same purposes. It has commonly been stated by those who oppose the doctrine of election that Paul cannot be arguing for the election of individuals in Romans 9 because the whole of Scripture teaches differently. Bible scholar John Stott, who does not identify as a Calvinist, argues in favor of the doctrine of individual election as evidenced in Romans 9. He explains, “First, election is not just a Pauline or apostolic doctrine; it was also taught by Jesus Himself. ‘I know those I have chosen,’ He said.”<sup>34</sup> Entire books have been written citing the biblical precedent for the doctrine of election outside of the Pauline epistles.<sup>35</sup> Paul’s clear teachings here are no theological anomaly. Stott goes on, stating, “Secondly, election is an indispensable foundation of Christian worship, in time and eternity. It is the essence of worship to say: ‘Not us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name be the glory.’”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps it is with this God-glorifying understanding of the doctrine of individual election that Paul later closes Romans 9-11, by exulting in the wisdom, knowledge, and unfathomable ways of the Lord.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Kruse, Colin G. *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012. 392.

<sup>34</sup> Stott, John. *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World*. London, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 2020. 268.

<sup>35</sup> Pink, Arthur W. *Doctrine of Election*. San Francisco, CA: Bottom Of The Hill Publishing, 2011.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>37</sup> See Romans 11:33-36.

**Romans 9:14-29 / Defense of Sovereignty**

After teaching on the sovereignty of God in electing a few from national Israel for his gracious purposes, Paul delivers a theodicy to his anticipated opponents regarding the justice of God. He begins this section by proclaiming that there can be no injustice with God, who Himself is the very standard for righteous justice. Again, Paul finds an Old Testament precedent for this statement, explaining in verse 15, “For He says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whomever I have mercy, and I will show compassion to whomever I show compassion.’” Here, it seems clear that God’s unrevealed divine purposes are sufficient reasoning for his choice in election. R.C. Sproul further discusses Paul’s point here, stating, “If grace is owed, it is not grace. The very essence of grace is its voluntary character. God reserves to himself the sovereign, absolute right to give grace to some and withhold that grace from others.”<sup>38</sup> Following this thought, Paul again affirms in verse 16 that the grace of God “does not depend on the man who wills it nor the one who runs, but on God who has mercy.” To satisfy his Jewish audience members, Paul appeals to more Old Testament support for his teaching on God’s character. Paul makes reference to the Lord’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart for the demonstration of His own power in delivering the Israelites. Just as God was active in the election of Isaac and Jacob earlier in the chapter, God is presented as active in the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart here. Here, Paul is teaching that God will harden those whom He wills in order that He be most glorified. Colin Kruse explains the implications this statement has for national Israel, stating, “This was the case with Israel and Pharaoh respectively in the time of the exodus, and, Paul implies, is still the case in his own day

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<sup>38</sup> Sproul, R.C. *The Righteous Shall Live by Faith: Romans*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009. 322.

in respect to the Jewish people.”<sup>39</sup> So that God’s plan for the expansion of the gospel to the Gentiles could be enacted, a partial hardening has come over Israel just as a hardening had come over Pharaoh in Exodus. In both situations, God is sovereignly working things together for His greater glory and for the good of His people.

Anticipating yet another response from doubtful members of his audience, Paul moves to answer the question of how the Lord can possibly find fault in those whom He does not elect for salvation. Paul addresses these doubts in verse 20 by responding, “On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?” Paul connects this principle to the common Old Testament example of a potter in the following verse, explaining that a potter reserves the right to use some of his clay for common use and some of his clay for honorable use. Here, Paul is referring to Isaiah 29:16, 45:9, 64:8, and Jeremiah 18-19, where the God’s people are depicted as mere clay in the Potter’s hand in order to emphasize God’s mighty sovereignty over His own creation. On Paul’s teaching here, Hendriksen argues that “it is no more rational, and far more arrogant and foolish, for men to question the justice and wisdom of God than, if such were possible, for a clay bowl to question the motives and purposes of the craftsman who made it.”<sup>40</sup> There is perhaps no clearer argument for God’s justice in sovereignly electing sinners to salvation than that given by Paul here. God, the perfect potter, maintains His justice because His own unsearchable purposes are forever perfect and just.

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<sup>39</sup> Kruse, Colin G. *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012. 383.

<sup>40</sup> Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Romans Chapters 9-16*. Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d. 38.

Paul continues to defend the justice of God in election by posing yet another rhetorical question to his opponents in verse 22, asking, “What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?” Paul follows up this question in verse 23 by explaining that God did so in order that His supreme glory would be made known “upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.” Attentive readers take note of the fact that the NASB uses the word ‘prepared’ to describe both the vessels of wrath and vessels of mercy, seemingly making a strong case for Theodore Beza’s doctrine of double predestination. Smith argues convincingly otherwise, first pointing out that “‘willing to demonstrate’ seems to indicate a reluctant willingness.”<sup>41</sup> Due to the possibility that Paul is simply using this rhetorical question hypothetically, where God is reluctantly willing to endure vessels of wrath, it is hard to use this verse to reach firm doctrinal conclusions. Additionally, Dr. Wayne Brindle points out that the Greek word translated “prepared” in verse 22 is distinct from the word translated to “prepared” in verse 23.<sup>42</sup> The word in verse 22 is *κατηρτισμένα* (from *καταρτίζω*), which Brindle explains to be a middle participle as opposed to a perfect passive.<sup>43</sup> By interpreting this word to be a middle instead of a passive, the vessels are no longer the ones being ‘prepared’ by God. Instead, the middle implies that the word is reflexive. “Middle means you are doing it to yourself, it is reflexive,” Smith explains. This understanding of verse 22 implies that the ‘preparation’ was not done by God, but by the vessels themselves beforehand. No other possible agent is given

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<sup>41</sup> Smith, Michael J., “BIBL 425, Romans” (unpublished class notes, Liberty University, Fall 2018).

<sup>42</sup> Brindle, Wayne A., “Prepared by Whom” (unpublished article, Liberty University, n.d.).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

beforehand. Smith urges his students to keep in mind Romans 1-3, where Paul makes it abundantly clear that mankind alone is responsible for his sinful, condemned state.<sup>44</sup> With regards to verse 23, the word translated ‘prepared’ is προητοίμασεν (from προετοιμάζω), an aorist, active, indicative. Unlike in verse 22, the ‘preparing’ agent is clearly God. While God’s sovereign hand in election is necessary for any to be saved, God is not active in the condemnation that mankind brought upon himself. As Dr. Brindle summarizes, "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... endured with patience the vessels of wrath, indicating that they were working against God, thus preparing themselves for judgment through disobedience."<sup>45</sup> God has patiently endured those who continuously reject His name and is in no way personally responsible for their hardened disobedience. It is with this understanding of Romans 9:22-23 that the doctrine of single-predestination is affirmed, and the doctrine of double-predestination is rejected.

Paul then applies his defense of God’s character back to the inclusion of the Gentiles in the Church, stating in verse 24 that God has effectually called “not from among the Jews only, but also from among the Gentiles.” Once again Paul cites the Prophets in support of his teaching, quoting both Hosea and Isaiah in verses 25-29. Hosea’s quotation indicates that Israel’s future hardening would be the occasion for the Gentiles being welcomed into relationship with God. Hendriksen notes that “Hosea was clearly speaking of restoration of Israelites. However, when

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<sup>44</sup> Brindle, Wayne A., "Prepared by Whom" (unpublished article, Liberty University, n.d.).

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

Paul makes use of the passage, he makes no such limitation. He speaks about ‘us... not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles.’”<sup>46</sup> It seems that Paul understands at least some Old Testament prophecy directed at the Israelites as being fulfilled in the church. The Isaiah quote similarly indicates that only the remnant of Israel, and not the entire nation, will be saved. Instead, true Israel has been fulfilled in Christ, making those in Christ the true Israelites under the New Covenant. It should be noted that a dispensational reading of the text highlights the “as” in verse 25, arguing instead that the Hosea quote is simply being used as a comparison or simile. With this understanding of the quote, Hosea would only be prophesying about Israel and no fulfillment in the Church would be acknowledged. The former reading of the text is preferred because of Paul’s direct mention of the Gentile inclusion in verse 24 and the exact manner in which Hosea’s prophecy mirrors the inclusion of Gentiles in the Church.

### **Romans 9:30-33 / Israel’s Unbelief**

Paul anticipates his Jewish audience’s response to these sobering teachings on the current state of their nation, going on to explain in verses 30-33 why the nation had failed to attain the righteousness of God. He does so by appealing to both his previous teachings on justification by faith and more prophetic literature. Paul explains that Israel had stumbled because “they did not pursue it [righteousness] by faith, but as though it were by works.” The apostle had already spent extensive time covering the precedent for justification by faith in Romans 4, making an appeal to these teachings here. Paul then describes the present condition of Israel by explaining that they had stumbled over the stumbling stone of Isaiah 28:16, resulting in their hardened condition.

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<sup>46</sup> Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Romans Chapters 9-16*. Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d. 331.



This stumbling stone, of course, is Christ. The nation had failed by rejecting His kingship and His Gospel of righteousness by faith. On this verse, Dr. Constable explains, “Israel's rejection of Jesus Christ did not make God unfaithful or unrighteous in His dealings with the nation. What it did do was make it possible for Gentiles to surpass the Jews as the main recipients of salvation.”<sup>47</sup> Israel’s hardened condition, however, is not without hope, being that God still desires for Israel to receive the gospel as depicted in Romans 10 and 11.

### **Romans 10:1-15 / Israel’s Need for the Gospel**

In a similar manner to the beginning of chapter 9, Paul begins chapter 10 by reminding the audience of his deep desire for ethnic Israel to come to salvation. Even though ethnic Israel is suffering a partial hardening by the sovereign choice of God, Paul sees no reason to stop preaching the Gospel to ethnic Jews with the hope that the nation would one day repent. He follows this up in verses 2-4 by explaining that Israel’s hardened condition has resulted in a national rejection of the Messiah, who “is the end of the Law for righteousness to everyone who believes.” Because the Jews had stumbled over the stumbling stone by pursuing a righteousness that was from the Law, faith in Christ would result in the end of this faulty righteousness. While God is indeed responsible for the salvation of any Jews who come to faith as evidenced in chapter 9, Romans 10 argues that it is the Jews themselves who are responsible for their own rejection of Christ. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains that “if a man is saved, it is because God has saved him. If a man is lost, that is to be attributed to his own rejection of the gospel and his rebellion against God’s way of salvation. It is in chapter 10 that the apostle takes up this second

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<sup>47</sup> “Dr. Constable's Expository (Romans) Notes.” Plano Bible Chapel. Accessed March 24, 2020. <https://planobiblechapel.org/constable-notes/>.

point.”<sup>48</sup> Thus, in verses 1-4 Paul sets up his explanation of the shortcomings of Israel’s faulty reliance on the Law and their need for the Gospel.

Verses 5-10 offer up a “comparison and a contrast between the Law and the gospel as a way of righteousness.”<sup>49</sup> Paul begins this comparison by stating that a righteousness based on the Law alone is unattainable because of the sinful nature of man’s heart. As Lloyd-Jones explains, “If people who think that they can make themselves a Christian only realized what they have got to do in order to bring that about, they would never think that again.”<sup>50</sup> Similarly, Israel had failed to realize how impossible the task of achieving righteousness by the Law truly was. Because God’s standard for righteousness by means of the Law is unattainable by fallible humanity, Israel has fundamentally misunderstood the righteousness of God in thinking that they could achieve such righteousness in their own strength. Verses 8-11 go on to explain how the Gospel and work of Christ in saving sinners by faith alone contrast with this works-based righteousness. Paul argues that one’s belief and confession in the work of Christ are sufficient for his or her salvation, stating in verse 10, “for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness.” It should be noted here that belief and confession are to be read as a singular unit indicating saving faith. Paul’s teachings here are fully consistent with his teaching on salvation by faith alone in Romans 4, being that belief and confession are not two separate “steps” towards

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<sup>48</sup> Lloyd-Jones, Martyn. *Romans*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970. 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

salvation. Paul suggests here that because of Israel's failure to humbly submit to the Gospel of faith in Christ, their condemnation is just.

In Romans 10:12, Paul explains that in Christ, there is "no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him." This means that the Gospel, while rejected by members of both communities, is still needed equally by both Jews and Gentiles alike. Because of the universal need for the Gospel, Paul encourages the Roman church to preach the Gospel avidly to all in verses 14-15. If faith is indeed the necessary component for one's salvation, as it is, the lost must receive preaching that accurately proclaims the Gospel of Christ Jesus, the object of their faith. While ethnic Israel may be in a state of hardened rejection, the Lord is still willing to save both sinful Jews and Gentiles as they hear the message Christ preached.

### **Romans 10:16-21 / Israel's Rejection of the Gospel**

The apostle follows up his teaching on Israel's present need for the Gospel with more Old Testament support regarding their state of rejection. Again citing the prophets, Paul explains in verse 16, "However, they did not all heed to the good news; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who was believed our report?'" Israel's religious leaders, hearing the gospel by the word of the apostles and the person of Christ, had failed to heed to the good news as prophesied by Isaiah. Paul is arguing here that from a corporate standpoint, Israel can be held fully accountable for the rejection of its own messianic king. Paul then explains that this rejection was in fact part of God's sovereign plan, quoting the word of Moses from Deuteronomy 32:21 in verse 19, "I will make you jealous by that which is not a nation, by a nation that is without understanding I will anger you." This nation without understanding, a clear reference to the Gentiles, is being used by

the Lord not only for their own redemption, but also in the fact that their salvation will eventually cause ethnic Israel to become jealous and repent in mass. This will be further discussed in Romans 11. However, the current 'angered' state of national Israel appears to be a result of divine judgment. Kruse explains Paul's quotation of Moses, stating, "By citing this text Paul seems to be implying that the failure of the Jewish people of his own day to understand the gospel they have heard is evidence of God's judgement upon them."<sup>51</sup> Even so, Paul will later explain that God is not done with ethnic Israel, the original inheritors of His promises and covenants.

### **Romans 11:1-10 / The Remnant of Israel**

Paul begins his discussion on the partial nature of Israel's rejection in Romans 11 by asking, "I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? Far from it! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." After detailing national Israel's justly condemned state before God due to their hardened hearts towards the gospel, Paul pivots to begin explaining God's future plans for ethnic Israel. If Paul himself is of Jewish descent, as were Christ and the other apostles, it is impossible to say that God has completely rejected the nation. As is consistent in God's dealings with Israel in the Old Testament, God has sovereignly set aside a faithful remnant for Himself on the basis of His electing grace. In verses 3-4, Paul explains this point using the example of Elijah. In a time when Israel was living in outright rebellion against God, Elijah cried out to the Lord in agony, exclaiming that he alone was the last faithful Israelite. God, however, responds in verse 4 by stating, "I have kept for Myself seven

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<sup>51</sup> Kruse, Colin G. *Paul's Letter to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012. 420.

thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” While much of Israel remained hardened and unrepentant in the times of both Elijah and Paul, God is faithful to preserve a remnant in both settings. Hendriksen elaborates on this, stating, “The fact that seven thousand had remained loyal to God must not be ascribed to Elijah’s energetic activity... or to the innate goodness of these faithful people, but to the sovereign will of God, to His delight in preserving Himself a remnant.”<sup>52</sup> This truth is identical to that previously preached by Paul in Romans 9 regarding God’s sovereign choice of regenerate Israel under the New Covenant. Paul then reinforces His previous teachings on election, stating in verse 5, “In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God’s gracious choice.” By His grace, God has elected some of ethnic Israel to be part of His faithful remnant. The rest of the nation, as evidenced by more Old Testament references in verses 7-10, are darkened at heart and unable to properly respond to the gospel.

### **Romans 11:11-24 / The Gentiles Grafted In**

Paul then aims to humble any prideful Gentiles in the Roman church by restating his love for ethnic Israel and detailing how God used Israel to invite the Gentiles into the New Covenant. First, Paul explains in verse 11 that it is by the transgression of national Israel that the gospel is able to reach the Gentiles. This transgression will lead ethnic Israel to become jealous of the inheritance of the faithful Gentiles, eventually leading the nation to repentance. Paul explains that this future salvation of Israel will ultimately result in riches for both Jew and Gentile, as God’s chosen people from both groups turn to Him, culminating in the Church. Paul notes in

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<sup>52</sup> Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Romans Chapters 9-16*. Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d. 362.

verse 13 that he is addressing the Gentiles here in order that they would understand God's distinct plan to save the Jewish people and not become arrogant in their current standing as members of God's covenant people. He then reminds the Gentiles in his audience of his desire to "move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them" in verse 14, once again making his love for the Jewish people evident. R.C. Sproul comments on this, stating, "The Jews were hostile, bitter in their opposition to the Christian church, but Paul hopes that as the glory of the church is continually made manifest, his kinsmen will see the greatness of the gospel."<sup>53</sup> With the apostle himself having such love and hope for his Jewish brethren, there is no room for anti-Semitic sentiment or prideful thinking from the Gentiles who have been welcomed into relationship with God by His gracious hand.

Verses 17-24 of chapter 11 build on the verses prior by reminding the Gentiles in the Roman church that they were grafted into a faith-based relationship with God. Here, the apostle uses an extensive metaphor to convey his point. Paul presents faithful Israel as an olive tree where some branches were broken off, representing unregenerate Israel, and others were grafted in, representing the faithful Gentiles. Paul's point here is that the root of the tree is still faithful Israel even after fruitless branches are cut off, and that the Gentiles have no right to act arrogantly towards their Jewish counterparts. After all, it is the faith-based 'tree' that the Gentiles have been grafted into. Just as Abraham was justified by faith in Romans 4, so too are the Gentiles. In a famous 1905 article discussing Paul's metaphor, Sir William Ramsay explains that in Palestine "it is customary to reinvigorate an olive tree which is ceasing to bear fruit by

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<sup>53</sup> Sproul, R.C. *The Righteous Shall Live by Faith: Romans*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009. 376.

grafting it with a shoot of the wild-olive, so that the sap of the tree ennobles this wild shoot and the tree now again begins to bear fruit.”<sup>54</sup> While this reinvigoration could very well have been a contextual point that Paul was trying to make, it cannot be claimed with a high degree of certainty. It can be said, however, that Paul is again attempting to combat Jew-Gentile tensions in the Roman church by giving a clear illustration of how both groups are now unified into one redeemed body by the grace of God.

### **Romans 11:25-32 / Israel’s Future Salvation**

Paul wants the Roman church to clearly understand that the hardening that has come over ethnic Israel is not without purpose. In verse 25, the apostle explains that this partial hardening will only last “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” After the predestined number of Gentiles have been called in and saved by the Lord’s sovereign hand, Paul says in Romans 11:26 that “all of Israel will be saved.” There is debated evidence that Israel’s future salvation as discussed by Paul here entails a national restoration, with some arguing instead for a mass salvation of ethnic Jews. On this, Hendriksen notes, “Although many Jews have been saved through the church’s witness, the vast majority of converts have been, and will continue to be, Gentiles- until their number is complete. That will signal the beginning of events that lead to Israel’s redemption, when all of Israel will be saved.”<sup>55</sup> This truth must have given Paul’s heart much joy, especially considering his anguish over the nation’s hardening in Romans 9:1-3 and 10:1. Israel’s future salvation, Paul teaches, is a result of God’s irrevocable promises to the

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<sup>54</sup> Ramsay, William. *Pauline and Other Studies in Early Christian History*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1970. 217.

<sup>55</sup> Hendriksen, William. *New Testament Commentary: Romans Chapters 9-16*. Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d. 128.

nation. Because He cannot revoke His word to the fathers of Israel, God will eventually display His great mercy to His chosen nation at a predetermined future time. Paul goes on in Romans 11:31, stating, “so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy.” The audience Paul is addressing here is the Gentiles, explaining that the same great mercy that was shown to many of them will eventually be shown to all of ethnic Israel. Once again, Paul levels the playing field for both groups by pointing to the sovereign hand of God as the sole cause for their salvation.

This section of Romans 11 is hotly debated by dispensationalists and covenant theologians because of its seemingly ambiguous reference to Israel’s future salvation. The Progressive Covenantal camp offers a satisfying middle-ground reading of Paul’s teachings. It must be noted that many amillennial and postmillennial covenant theologians affirm that this text points towards a future salvation of ethnic Israel but not a literal political restoration. In *Progressive Covenantalism*, Richard J. Lucas argues that “none of the restoration features are explicitly mentioned in Romans 11” or in other New Testament texts.<sup>56</sup> Instead, Romans 11:26 should be read as speaking directly to the future *salvation* of Israel. While some progressive dispensationalists argue that the New Covenant has been partially inaugurated in the spiritual sense with a physical inauguration pending, Lucas believes that “instead of arguing that only part of the New Covenant has been inaugurated and the other part is yet to be consummated, it is better to see the entire new covenant as already inaugurated with the consummation of these

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<sup>56</sup> Wellum, Stephen J., and Brent E. Parker. *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016. 236.



promises not yet realized.”<sup>57</sup> A fully inaugurated view of the New Covenant is consistent with Progressive Covenantal thinking, which sees Christ as the *telos*, or complete fulfillment, of God’s covenantal dealings with His people. Here, it is argued that any division of the new covenant into spiritual and physical, as is with some dispensational readings of Romans 11, is artificial.<sup>58</sup> Lucas does not see a biblical precedent for the partial inauguration of God’s covenants with His people.<sup>59</sup> With the understanding that the New Covenant has been fully inaugurated for both the Jew and Gentile alike, progressive covenantalism views the two ethnic groups as spiritual equivalents in Christ. Lucas understands Romans 11:12, discussing the salvation of the fullness of Israel, and Romans 11:25, discussing the salvation of the fullness of the Gentiles, as two distinct spiritual markers for the salvation of each group.<sup>60</sup> While both groups are viewed as spiritual equivalents, there is a clear chronological distinction in when the ‘fullness’ of each group will be saved. Even with this distinction acknowledged, progressive covenantalism denies a biblical precedent for distinction in the two group’s political futures. With this comes a rejection of the dispensational reading of the Abrahamic land promise, where political Israel reigns distinctly from Christian Gentiles in the millennium. Gentry and Wellum, the fathers of Progressive Covenantalism, “reject interpretations that spiritualize the land. Foundational to the Progressive Covenantal view of the land is the belief that the land and the

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<sup>57</sup> Wellum, Stephen J., and Brent E. Parker. *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016. 240.

<sup>58</sup> Gentry, Peter John, and Stephen J. Wellum. *Kingdom through Covenant: a Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018. 223.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

land promise in the Old Testament serve as a type of the new creation.”<sup>61</sup> Being that Jews and Gentiles alike are united in Christ, Wellum and Gentry argue that both groups become inheritors of the promises made to Abraham and his children with the land promise ultimately reaching consummation in the new creation. This unified New Covenant community is best described by Thomas Schreiner, who states that “ethnic Israel and Gentiles become part of spiritual Israel by believing in the true Israelite, Jesus Christ.”<sup>62</sup> In doing so, both groups become inheritors of the promises given to God’s people through the fulfilling work of Christ.

A dispensationalist would be quick to point out some of the hermeneutical deficiencies in progressive covenantalism. To begin with, while Wellum’s camp claims to take a more literal reading of Scripture than their reformed counterparts, a dispensationalist would argue that progressive covenantalism still spiritualizes both Israel and the land promise in a way that is unmerited by the text. The core distinction between the two theological camps is found in dispensationalism’s unwillingness to read ‘Israel’ as including faithful Gentiles, arguing that such a conclusion makes God out as having deceived His people in Old Testament promises to the nation. Because of this, dispensationalism sees covenant theology’s spiritualization of Israel and the land promise as an unmerited redefinition of clear Old Testament teachings. On Romans 11:26, dispensationalist commentator Thomas Constable explains:

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<sup>61</sup> Collins, Brian. “The Land Promise in Scripture: An Evaluation of Progressive Covenantalism’s View of the Land,” 2016. Accessed September 10, 2020.  
<https://onedrive.live.com/?authkey=%21AHAnysqoWoQQ08I&cid=7B8722D9F849E0AC&id=7B8722D9F849E0AC%21275818&parId=7B8722D9F849E0AC%212616&o=OneUp>.

<sup>62</sup> Schreiner, Thomas. “The Church as the New Israel and the Future of Ethnic Israel in Paul.” *SBTS*. Last modified 2013. Accessed September 15, 2020.  
<http://d3pi8hptl0qhh4.cloudfront.net/documents/tschreiner/SBT13.pdf>. 37.

Whenever the name "Israel" appears in the New Testament, it refers either to the whole nation of Jacob's racial descendants (ethnic Jews), or to the believing remnant within that group. It is not another name for the church. John Calvin believed "Israel" meant "the church," and covenant theologians have followed in his train.<sup>63</sup>

Because of this, Constable sees 'all of Israel' being saved as bearing political implications for the nation. After the nation repents, God will be true to His promises to the nation under the Abrahamic covenant by providing them a physical land to rule over during the millennium.

Unlike with Wellum and Gentry, Gentiles are not seen as recipients of this promise and Israel's distinctness is emphasized. While both camps offer up convincing scriptural evidence, one's understanding of Israel in Romans 11 will ultimately be determined by his or her willingness to acknowledge a more typological or symbolic understanding of Israel in the New Testament.

### **Romans 11:33-36 / Praises of Sovereign God**

Paul closes his discussion on God's plans for Israel by praising God for His sovereign goodness. While these teachings would have likely come off as shocking and complex to their original Roman audience, Paul wants to affirm the glory of God's perfect character amidst these teachings. In Romans 11:33, the apostle cries out, "Oh, the depth of the riches, both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" While God's full knowledge and purposes could never be entirely understood by finite humanity, Paul praises God for holding both the Jews' and Gentiles' futures in His sovereign hands. Romans expert Douglas J. Moo beautifully states, "We cannot penetrate the mind of God. He does not need to consult us before He decides what He is going to do. At a certain point, we

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<sup>63</sup> "Dr. Constable's Expository (Romans) Notes." *Plano Bible Chapel*. Accessed March 24, 2020. <https://planobiblechapel.org/constable-notes/>.

must stop questioning and demanding answers and simply believe and worship.”<sup>64</sup> A true believer knows and trusts in the goodness of God, regardless of his or her inability to comprehend God’s ways. While Paul’s teachings on God’s sovereign plan for Israel may be difficult to digest for both Jew and Gentile alike, both groups can rest assured that God is working out all things for their good and His own glory.

### Conclusion

Romans 9-11, while hotly debated by many theologians, teaches rather clear doctrine when read within its immediate context and with the whole of Scripture in mind. To begin with, Paul’s teaching on unconditional election in Romans 9 cannot be ignored as referring to only corporate election. Paul’s usage of individuals in Old Testament examples of God’s electing hand indicate that God is always graciously electing individual sinners to salvation on the basis of His own higher purposes. This principle is further reinforced as Paul discusses God’s sovereign election of the faithful remnant of Israel in the following two chapters. Additionally, any appeals to the foreknowledge of God that deny God as the sole active agent in saving sinners miss Paul’s entire point in Romans 9. Paul’s use of the aorist, active, indicative word for “prepared” in Romans 9:23, προητοίμασεν, is one of the many indications in Romans 9-11 that God alone is active and not passive in the election of His people. The issue of Israel’s future is slightly more ambiguous than Paul’s teachings on election. Paul explains in Romans 10 that Israel does indeed still have a need for the gospel, and that their failure to seek righteousness by faith is the result of their hardening. Paul then indicates in Romans 11 that the Jews and Gentiles,

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<sup>64</sup> Moo, Douglas J. *Encountering the Book of Romans: a Theological Survey*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014. 158.

while united as members of Christ's redeemed bride, have distinct plans for salvation as the end times approach. Once the fullness of the Gentiles come in, Israel's salvation will soon follow, spurred on by jealousy for the faithful Gentiles. Progressive covenantal theologians would argue that there is little precedent in the text for a political restoration of Israel, instead seeing Israel's salvation as a mass repentance of ethnic Jews. Dispensationalists, on the other hand, would argue that a national restoration of Israel is merited in order for God's promises to the nation to reach fulfillment. The differing conclusions of each group are largely based on the theologian's understanding of covenant and willingness to spiritualize certain texts. Regardless, both camps affirm that Paul is referring distinctly to the salvation of ethnic Israel, again displaying God's faithfulness to redeem his elect people.

Finally, it should be noted that Paul's teaching on election here works in tandem with his discussion of Israel's future. The doctrine of election cannot be properly understood without first looking to God's election of the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. Michael Bird explains that there are numerous types of election in the Scriptures, namely "the election of Abraham's descendants to form the nation of Israel" and the election "of individuals predestined to salvation."<sup>65</sup> In both forms of election, God is glorified in the choosing of some for an honorable purpose. In his Romans commentary, Bird explains that Romans 9-11 "undoubtedly contributes to a theology of divine predestination. For a start, he talks about the choosing of individuals for salvation as examples of corporate election... There is a strong emphasis that God's choosing is

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<sup>65</sup> Bird, Michael F. *Evangelical Theology: a Biblical and Systematic Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020. 515.

based on pure mercy [and] never merited.”<sup>66</sup> God’s character as an electing God remains consistent from His corporate election of Israel under the Old Covenant to His particular election of individuals to salvation by faith today. In both His gracious election of Abraham’s descendants and His unmerited election of individuals to salvation, God is glorified as the faithful Redeemer of His elect.

Regardless of the various theological conclusions one reaches after studying Romans 9-11, he or she should aim to take up the same mindset as Paul in Romans 11:33-36. The ways of the Lord are far higher than those of man, so much so that man can hardly fathom the greatness of His divine purposes. Believers should humbly approach the difficult doctrines presented here with confidence that the sovereign purposes and plans of the Lord are certain to be completed. As Paul gracefully concludes his discussion on election and the nation of Israel in Romans 11:36, “For from Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

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<sup>66</sup> Bird, Michael F. *Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016. 323.

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