

THE MISAPPLICATION OF ROMANS NINE TO PREDETESTINARIAN VIEWS

THE DIFFICULT ISSUES AND PAUL'S APPROACH IN THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

The book of Romans is perhaps the hardest to understand of all Paul's writings. This is not because he wishes to be difficult to understand but rather it is because the issues he is dealing with are simply difficult issues. Yet it was essential that he dealt with them.

Paul's teaching **method** was:

1. To deal with anticipated questions Paul follows a pattern of stating *a premise*, then *an objection* to the premise and finally *refuting* the objection.
2. Throughout Romans 9 Paul uses a number of **analogies** or illustrations. Concerning these theologian JAT Robinson notes in his book *Wrestling with Romans*:

But we must not press Paul's analogies, here or elsewhere. He has brought it in for one purpose only to show that God has absolute freedom over his creatures: He is not concerned at this point to find one which will safeguard their freedom (p. 116).

The Romans 9-11 section is really a detailed expansion of the issues raised and sketchily outlined in Chapter 3 concerning **the upholding of God's righteousness in spite of the fact that the majority of national Israel proved to be unbelieving** (Rom. 3:3, 4).

THE SUBJECT CONCERNS GROUPS AND NOT INDIVIDUALS

Romans 9-11 is not primarily about the choosing of individuals but about the choosing or election of those *peoples* that God wishes to use to further His purpose. With reference to chapters 9-11 Robinson notes:

As far as his immediate meaning is concerned it is clear that his problem throughout these chapters is not with the ultimate destiny of individuals but with the relation of different groups (Israel according to the flesh and the Gentiles) to incorporation into the true Israel. *Wrestling with Romans*, p.131.

PROVED BY THE BACKGROUND TO PAUL'S QUOTATIONS

Paul clearly shows that the main subject is that of unbelieving Israel. Yet Paul's quotations can mistakenly be read as though they concern individuals; that is until one examines the full context of the Hebrew Scriptures from which Paul has drawn. These Scriptures are: Genesis 21:12; 25:23; Malachi 1:1-4; 1 Samuel 6:6; Jeremiah 18:3-8 and Hosea 2:23. So Robinson concludes in *Wrestling with Romans* concerning Paul's thoughts:

From what he has said in chapters 1 and 2 and goes on to say in 9.30-10.21 it is certain that he does not teach **a doctrine of the divine sovereignty which leaves men without choice** or responsibility for their actions, p.115.

THEME: GOD IS JUSTIFIED IN REJECTING UNBELIEVING ISRAEL

Although Paul says he has: "unceasing grief in my heart ... for...my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites" (Rom. 9: 2-3) he recognizes that, because of **national Israel's** rejection of God's Messiah, God is fully justified in rejecting them **without such rejection nullifying his promise to Abraham** whose descendents included Israel. This is why Paul says: "But it is not as

*though the word of God has failed” (Rom. 9: 6a). This is because it is God’s prerogative to choose one body of people and reject another body of people according to how they serve His purpose. However, there is **no injustice** (Rom. 9:14) in this, but rather there is a demonstration of His mercy with an excellent outcome revealed in chapter 11 because:*

- 1) A remnant of Israel does currently believe (Rom.11:5).
- 2) Gentiles have a better opportunity than they had before (Rom.11:11-15).
- 3) Jealousy over the Gentiles will induce the Jewish nation to repent (Rom.11:14).
- 4) Israel has a further opportunity when Christ returns. (Rom. 11:25-27).

So Paul proceeds to demonstrate how God has the right to make these choices by the use of 3 illustrations.

1st ILLUSTRATION

“THE CHILDREN OF THE PROMISE” COME THROUGH ISAAC AND THEN THROUGH JACOB

Genesis 18:18 demonstrates God’s choice of Abraham’s descendants for the blessing of “all the nations of the earth.” Clearly all those not descended from Abraham are excluded from this privilege.

GOD’S CHOICE EXCLUDES ISHMAELITES

Paul shows that the idea that physical descent from Abraham through Ishmael, who was born from the slave girl Hagar, does not establish the basis for that nation to receive what was promised to Abraham. Israelites were obviously well aware of this fact. It is nothing new to them.

Romans 9: 6b-9:

“For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; nor are they children because they are **Abraham’s descendants**, but: ‘Through **Isaac** your **descendants** will be named’ (from **Genesis 21:12**). That is it is not *the children of the flesh* who are **the children of God**, but *the children of the promise* are regarded as descendants.”

Paul here introduces the contrasting terms: “*the children of the flesh*” and “*the children of the promise*” and that the latter “are regarded as descendants [*seed*].” i.e. **the children of God**. Clearly Paul is not speaking of individuals but of descendants as nations.

GOD’S CHOICE EXCLUDES EDOMITES

The children of Esau were the Edomites. So Paul now demonstrates that God makes a national choice even though parentage is through the same mother i.e. Isaac’s wife, Rebekah.

Verses 10, 11:

“Rebekah...when she **had conceived** twins by one man, our father Isaac; 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**...”

*For whatever reason God made this choice or election it was not with any foreknowledge about Jacob and Esau from before the foundation of the world. It was when they were in **their conceived state**.*

GOD EXCLUSIVELY CHOOSES WHICH GROUP WILL SERVE HIS PURPOSE

Paul is now beginning to show that it is entirely God’s prerogative to decide who constitutes his chosen people. Paul is moving into his explanation that God has a right to reject Israel because of their

unbelief in Messiah and then to elect (choose) Gentiles to become part of true “Israel.” So verses 10 and 11 cannot be used successfully in any attempt to prove **individual predestination, from before the foundation of the world**. This is simply not the subject of Paul’s discussion. So now he develops this theme of God’s rights in national election when he quotes part of Genesis 25:23:

Verse 12: “*THE OLDER WILL SERVE THE YOUNGER*”

From *Genesis 25:23* which says:

“Two **nations** are in your [*Rebekah’s*] womb; and two **peoples** will be separated from your body; and one people shall be stronger than the other; and the *older shall serve the younger.*”

Here Paul refers to **the two nations, Israel and Edom** that descended from Jacob and Esau and not to them personally because this would not fit with Paul’s theme. The same national election reference is made in:

Verse 13 “*JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED*” (a Semitism for ‘loved less’) is quoted from *Malachi 1:2, 3* where the context of *verse 1* shows that the term *Jacob* refers to the **nation of Israel** because it is “the word of the LORD to **Israel** through Malachi” *Jacob himself having died centuries earlier*. The context of *Malachi 1:4* shows that the term ‘Esau’ refers to **Edom, the nation descended from Esau** and not Esau personally. If this had referred to Esau and Jacob personally it would have been a false prophecy because Esau never personally served Jacob. So this quotation is for the purpose of showing that God had **chosen Jacob’s national line [Israel]** rather than Esau’s as the blessed line leading to Messiah. It is the choosing for position, service, inheritance and blessing of believing mankind—the **children of God - the children of the promise** rather than individual salvation that is in view here. Hence there is no predestinarian concept at work in this part of this illustration which concerns God’s selection of Jacob’s national line.

GOD IS SOVEREIGN—BUT DO HUMANS HAVE NO FREE WILL?

However, those with a predestinarian view often jump on Verse 16 for proof that humans have no genuine free will. And this in spite of the earlier and later context:

Verse 16:

“So then it does **not depend on the man who wills** or the man who runs, but **on God** who has mercy.”

Here predestinarians commit the fallacy of *the False Dilemma* when they decide that something that depends either **initially** or **ultimately** on God means that it can depend **only** on God. The fact that the man **wills** shows he has his part to play and therefore displays *free will*. Nevertheless, our salvation is not possible with just our will. Ultimately salvation depends on God who **initiates it** by making the provisions for it and the opportunity for acceptance of it. Hence there are *complex causes* involved in individual salvation and with no proof that God’s will is the exclusive cause of the choosing for salvation. Hence there is **nothing in this verse to suggest that men believe because God compels them to**. Or that His will is irresistible in the matter of individual salvation. Nevertheless, the context of the entire illustration would indicate that “*the man who wills or the man who runs*” is pictorial of the groups spoken of so far i.e. Ishmaelites, Edomites and Israelites. In short, verse 16 means that no group of **humans can choose themselves to become the ones by means of which God fulfils His purpose**. It is only God who makes such choices. So this first illustration gives no support to the predestinarian teaching concerning individual salvation.

2nd ILLUSTRATION

GOD CAN USE HIS ENEMIES TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSE

This illustration is often used by predestinarians as proof that humans do not have genuine free will. Verse 17:

“For the Scripture says to **Pharaoh** ‘For this very purpose I raised you up to (1) **demonstrate my power in you**, and (2) that my name might be proclaimed throughout the whole earth.’”

Now Pharaoh is later shown by Paul to be a *vessel of wrath*. Regarding this and the contrasting *vessels of mercy* Robinson says: “As an example of the former he cites **Moses** (the representative of God’s people) and of the latter **Pharaoh** (the representative of God’s enemies).” (*Wrestling with Romans*, p.118).

So this is not a small picture concerning individuals but is a big picture involving nations. It concerns God’s use of His enemies as a tool to accomplish His particular purpose at that time. Hence the raising up of Pharaoh as representative of the Egyptians—probably from the time of his installation as king—was for God’s dual purpose and has nothing to do with the individual free will of Christians. In that ancient event it was **Moses and the Israelites** who received God’s Mercy and **Pharaoh and the Egyptians** who were hardened by God.

Verse 18:

“So then 1) He has **mercy** on whom He desires, and 2) He **hardens** whom He desires.”

NO DENIAL OF FREE WILL — PHARAOH PARTICIPATED IN HARDENING HIS OWN HEART

❖ “I [God] will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go” (*Ex. 4:21*).

Yet these verses do not say that Pharaoh’s *good heart* was hardened by God to make him commit sin. James 1:13-15 states that: “He [God] does not tempt anyone.” This is, in fact, a case of *COMPLEX CAUSE* because of what is said in the following two verses:

❖ “...when **Pharaoh** saw there was relief, **he hardened his heart**” (*Ex. 8:15*). Also verse 32 & 9:34.

In *1 Samuel 6:6* the Philistines were warned:

“Why then do you harden your hearts as *the Egyptians* and Pharaoh **hardened their** hearts?”

This hardening of Pharaoh and the Egyptians seems to have occurred at the first meeting with Moses. However, there is a progression of hardening because Pharaoh becomes inflamed over each demand from God through Moses (8:15, 32; 9:34). It is a case of Pharaoh and the Egyptians “digging their heels in.” Yet interestingly the main Hebrew word used concerning the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart by God is *chazaq* which means *to strengthen or give courage*. So God’s part was that of **emboldening** Pharaoh to do what he was stubbornly determined to do even in the face of the devastating plagues on Egypt. Furthermore, the OT appendix to Rotherham’s translation reveals that in Hebrew the *permission* of an event is often presented as if it were the *cause* of the event so that Rotherham renders Exodus 4:21: “I **will let his heart wax bold**.” So God allowed Pharaoh to harden his own heart by presenting him with occasions that he would react to. Yet Pharaoh still had free will to relent if he had wanted to.

EXAMPLE—CHRISTIANS COULD HARDEN THEIR HEARTS

❖ “Do not harden your hearts...” (*Heb. 3:8 and 4:7*).

❖ “...so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin” (*Heb. 3:13b*).

Certainly hardening in sin is something that God allows for individuals. However, this is only at a time **after their initial sin** and God is always hopeful of their repentance. But, this particular hardening of Pharaoh and the Egyptians served God’s specific purpose: “to **demonstrate my power**” and to work

toward the coming of Messiah through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The passage proves nothing in regard to the genuineness of individual human free will.

WHAT CANNOT BE RESISTED?

Verse 19:

“You will say to me then, ‘why does He still find fault? (*in rejecting unbelieving Israelites*). For who **resists His will?**’

The earlier contexts indicate that God’s will that cannot be resisted concerned His purpose to bring Israel out of Egypt. So, too, it is His **overall purpose** that cannot be resisted. Certainly individuals have the free will to resist God’s will for their own salvation just as many of the Israelites did in their rejection of the Messiah. God does not force anyone to become a Christian because they have the free will to resist:

- ❖ “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears **always resisting the Holy Spirit**; you are doing just as your fathers did” (*Acts 7:51*).
- ❖ “But the Pharisees and the lawyers **rejected God’s purpose for themselves**, not having been baptized by John” (*Luke 7:30*).

So, as with Romans 9:18, verse 19 in no way provides any proof that humans do not have genuine free will as predestinarians would propose.

3rd ILLUSTRATION

VESSELS MADE FROM THE POTTER’S CLAY

Verses 20, 21:

“On the contrary, who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing moulded will not say to the moulder, ‘Why did you make me like this,’ will it?

Or does not the potter have **a right over the clay**, to make from the *same lump* one vessel for an **honourable use** and another for **common use?**”

NOTE: “The same lump” refers to: *the nation of Israel as natural descendents of the Patriarchs* (see *Rom. 11:16*).

For this illustration Paul quotes Isaiah 29:16 the context of which is “this people” i.e. Israel. However, he also likely draws upon the object lesson in:

Jeremiah 18:3-5, 8:

“So I went down to the potter’s house, and there he was working at his wheel. And the vessel he was making of clay *was spoiled* in the potter’s hand, and **he reworked it** into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do. Then the word of the LORD came to me: **O house of Israel**, ‘can I not do with you as this potter has done? ... if **that nation**, concerning which I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.’”

So *each vessel* being made does not represent an individual, but rather it *represents a nation*, in this case, the “**house of Israel**.” In context, the very point of this lesson was to show the Israelites how wrong their thinking was when they decided, fatalistically, that there was nothing they could do to alter God’s mind concerning His planned punishment of them **as a nation** because there was nothing they could do to change their own bad ways. They resignedly said: “It’s hopeless!” (*Verse 12 NASB*). Yet just as with the potter, whose first plan might be spoiled, so too with God—He has the power to rework His plan. Clearly this object lesson shows that the future is not unalterably fixed. So to say, as predestinarians do, that individuals, like clay, have no free will, is to assume that Paul’s illustration concerns individuals. However, this does not fit his theme about unbelieving national Israel and we

should not press Paul's statements because he does not refer to any trait of *having no will* as being common to both the clay and humans. He simply does not make such a point. In Paul's illustration the commonality between the two is **that both the clay and therefore the relevant groups of people have a higher power working with them** making them into what He wants. Now the making of the "vessels of wrath" and the "vessels of mercy" recalls the divine choice of Jacob over Esau, which evidently concerned the national lines that descended from them. However, unlike the situation with Egypt as a *vessel of wrath* which God destroyed He makes the decision to "**endure with much patience**" unbelieving Israel which has now made itself into a *vessel of wrath*.

ROLE REVERSAL YET NOT IRRIVERSIBLE FOR ISRAEL

Verses 22-23:

"[Lit. *But*] 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?** And He did so to make known the riches of His glory upon *vessels of mercy*, which He prepared beforehand for glory..."

Robinson notes that: "Only this time the roles are ironically reversed. Israel now represents the vessel of his wrath (standing where Pharaoh did), the Gentiles the vessel of his mercy." (*Wrestling with Romans*, p.118).

The application of the vessels illustration primarily to peoples rather than individuals becomes further evident in the quotation from *Hosea 2:23* in:

Verse 25:

"I will call those who are not my people, 'My people,' and her who was not beloved, 'Beloved.'"

So, because of Israel's temporary failure, the door is now more fully open than ever before for Gentiles to become God's people. Yet C.K. Barrett's commentary on Romans makes the point that:

It appears that the designation 'vessels of wrath' and 'vessels of mercy' is not irreversible...that he is also thinking (as Hosea did) of the temporary lapse of Israel and their subsequent return, that is, of the possibility that 'vessels of wrath' might become 'vessels of mercy', p.178.

DOESN'T THE PLURAL WORD "VESSELS" REFER TO INDIVIDUALS?

No! This is simply a reference back to the past examples of Jacob, Esau, Moses and Pharaoh as representatives of the particular groups. Nevertheless, doesn't "**prepared for destruction**" mean that such vessels have no choice? Again No! Even if this passage concerned individuals, which it does not, they are not prepared for destruction by God. However, whenever the reference is it to individuals Paul shows that it is largely up to them whether or not they want to be a vessel for an honourable use:

❖ "...if anyone *cleanses himself* from what is dishonourable, he will be a vessel for honourable use..."
(2 Tim. 2:21).

❖ "...since you repudiate it [*the word of God*] and judge **yourselves** unworthy of eternal life..."
(Acts 13:46).

So these verses and many others indicate that individuals have complete free will in the matter of salvation. And the potter's clay illustration also gives no basis for believing that God originally predestined **all** individuals, either to salvation or to destruction.

CONCLUSION

The lesson Paul is giving in Romans 9:6-23 is that to fulfil His promises to Abraham God has the right to choose which body of people he wants for that purpose. Yet there is no injustice in this choice.

Just as Moses, the representative of Israel, was a *vessel of mercy* in his day and Pharaoh, the representative of God's enemies, was a *vessel of wrath* so now the roles are reversed with Israel, because of unbelief, now as a *vessel of wrath* and Gentiles having become a *vessel of mercy*. Furthermore, God has the right to destroy what becomes unfit for his purpose; yet with Israel He chose not to do so because, unlike the absolute hardening of Pharaoh, Israel is **only partially hardened** and through this hardening, salvation, as an expression of God's mercy, has come to Gentiles just as Paul stated: "...that a partial **hardening** has happened to Israel *until* the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and all Israel will be saved" (**Rom. 11:25**).

Although much more could be said about Romans 9 we can see that Paul has answered the question as to whether the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham depends on the course that nations and peoples might take or on God alone. Furthermore, the failure of national Israel in general has not blocked the progress of God's plan nor His purpose to freely show mercy. God has full freedom to fulfil His promises to Abraham in spite of any human failure.

Evidently none of this concerns individuals as not having genuine free will nor is it about any predestination for salvation of them from before the foundation of the world.

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SUGGESTED READING

Elect in the Son by Robert Shank
Life in the Son by Robert Shank

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