

Background

Before entering into the text of Romans 9-11, it is helpful to understand the historical backdrop for this passage and the issues Paul addressed in it. The congregation of believers at Rome – like most first century church bodies – was comprised of both Jewish and Gentile members. The significance of this fact is easily lost on contemporary Christians, primarily because few of them have any real comprehension of the monumental upheaval that characterized first century Christianity – an upheaval that had its focal point in Jewish/Gentile relations.

That tensions existed between Jewish and Gentile Christians in the early Church is evident from even a casual reading of the New Testament, but what is perhaps not so obvious is that these difficulties were not so much ethnic as *salvation-historical*. That is to say, the problems between Jews and Gentiles in the first century were centered in the realities of fulfillment and transformation that had come in Christ's redemptive work and the new age inaugurated by it.

- For two thousand years God had been the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and their descendents after them. In accordance with His covenant with Abraham, God had chosen Israel to be His unique people among all the nations of the earth (Deuteronomy 7:1-8).
- Being the covenant seed of Abraham, Israel alone was God's beloved "son" (Exodus 4:21-23; Hosea 11:1; etc.), and the identity of these sons of Yahweh was bound up in the Mosaic Law. When God called Israel out of Egypt and took them to Himself in fulfillment of His promise to Abraham, He entered into covenant with them at Sinai. That covenant – the Law of Moses – both established and defined Israel's relationship with God. He had promised Abraham that He would be the God of his descendents, and that promise was fulfilled, and the resulting relationship administered, through the vehicle of the Sinai Covenant. There was to be no relationship with Yahweh apart from the Mosaic Law, so that Israel's identity as God's people was inseparable from her possession of and adherence to the *Torah* (the Law as recorded in the five books of Moses).
- This is not to imply that the Gentiles were entirely excluded, but a Gentile's participation among God's chosen people depended upon his being joined to Israel through the covenant sign of circumcision (Genesis 17; Exodus 12:48-49). He had to connect himself to the household of Abraham in order to commune with God (cf. Ephesians 2:11-12).
- Now, with Christ's coming, a new reality had been ushered in; a reality that the former order of things had merely portrayed and anticipated. According to Jesus' own teaching and the witness of His apostles, all things had been fulfilled in Him: Israel's covenant with God at Sinai had been taken up in the New Covenant in Christ's blood (Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:1-18; Hebrews 8:1-9:18), and the people of God were now determined by *spiritual* rather than *physical* connection with Abraham resulting from being joined to his singular Seed (Galatians 3:1-29; cf. also Matthew 3:1-10; John 8:31-59; Romans 2:28-29, 4:1-25). This latter fulfillment was not unforeseen, for Israel itself – as God's beloved "servant-son" – stood as the prophetic promise of another such son of Yahweh (cf. Isaiah 41:8-10, 44:1-21, and 45:1-4 with 42:1-7, 49:1-12). Thus Israel's own fulfillment in Christ implicated the global Gentile mission (Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:1-8, 8:1-11:18).

- Given the profound and all-encompassing nature of these changes, it is not surprising that they were a matter of great difficulty in the first century. They were only gradually discerned and sorted out in the churches (indeed, many Christians to this day still struggle with them), and the challenges they posed for early believers must not be underestimated. The various issues of Christ's fulfillment were not only radical, the fledgling Church was the first Christian generation to have to grapple with them. And more than simply lacking the benefits that come with time and exposure, they did not have the resource of the New Testament, and so were dependent upon apostolic insight, instruction and decisions.

At bottom, the fundamental question facing the early Church was the relationship between the Old and New Covenants. Jews who had put their faith in Christ were left to wrestle with how their Christianity implicated their responsibility to the Law of Moses. This was difficult enough in itself, but it further raised the matter of the *Gentile's* relationship to the Law, now that Gentiles were being rapidly added to the household of God (cf. again Acts 1-7 with 8-19).

- The Jewish Christian's relationship to the Law of Moses was an especially problematic issue in that conformity to Torah was a matter of *ethnicity* and *culture*, and not simply covenantal and legal obligation. Quite apart from the issue of personal righteousness before God, the fact that every aspect of a Jew's individual identity was bound up in the Law seemed to imply that departure from it meant the forsaking of one's Jewishness. If Christ's New Covenant has indeed supplanted the Law of Moses, how was a Jew to embrace Christ without ceasing to be Jewish? To this day Jews ask the same question.
- With regard to the Gentiles, hadn't God given circumcision to Abraham as the sign of His covenant with him? Since that time every Gentile who had joined himself to Yahweh had received the covenantal sign. And if it is true that Jesus is the singular seed of Abraham and heir of God's covenant promise – with the result that those who are joined to Jesus are constituted true sons of Abraham – should not such sons bear the mark of their covenant father? Even Jesus Himself had been circumcised as a son of Abraham. How is it, then, that a Gentile can be considered a true child of God without being circumcised?

And what of the other matters that distinguished God's people from the balance of mankind? Should not Gentile believers – as well as Jewish Christians – express their consecration to God by following the commandments He had given to Israel to manifest that principle of consecration (such as dietary laws)?

These are the sorts of issues that troubled the early Church and were the subject of ongoing apostolic consideration, instruction, and mediation (cf. esp. Acts 15:1-31; Ephesians 2:11-3:12; Colossians 3:1-11; and Paul's Galatian epistle). For its part, the Roman church, consisting also of Jewish and Gentile believers, was not exempt from them. It, too, had to grapple with the ramifications of a salvation that was "*to the Jew first, and also to the Greek*" (1:16, 2:1-3:31). In the context at hand, however, the concern was not so much with Jewish and Gentile Christian responsibility to the Law of Moses, but the relationship between Jewish Israel and the largely Gentile Church in the eternal saving purpose of God. More precisely, the issue Paul sought to address in these chapters is God's "casting off" of Israel in connection with the coming of the gospel of Christ and its implication for His integrity in "keeping covenant" with His people.

Overview

As a final introductory note, it is worthwhile to consider an overview of the entire context. Not only does this lay a solid foundation for examining the passage as a whole, it helps guard against the fragmenting and counterproductive proof-text approach addressed previously. Toward that end, Douglas Moo observes:

“Once we recognize the importance of this Jewish motif in Romans, we can give Rom. 9-11 its appropriate place in the letter. In these chapters Paul is not simply using Israel to illustrate a theological point, such as predestination or the righteousness of God. He is talking about Israel herself, as he wrestles with the implication of the gospel for God’s ‘chosen people’ of the OT.”

As noted, the issue Paul was addressing in this context is preeminently salvation-historical. He was seeking to answer the question of Jewish Israel’s present place and future in God’s redemptive purpose in light of the “fullness of the times,” Christ’s institution of the New Covenant, and most especially Israel’s unbelief in rejection of her own Messiah. Previously it was seen that the two great impediments to rightly interacting with Paul’s argumentation are unsubstantiated and misleading presuppositions and the tendency to use the Scripture as a collection of proof texts. Both of these impediments are overcome when the reader adopts Paul’s own redemptive-historical perspective. While most readily concede that Paul was addressing salvation-historical issues in these three chapters, few seem to grasp Paul’s own perspective on salvation history. The result is failure to read and understand him as he intended and an interpretation driven by one’s own presuppositions and agenda.

Repeatedly Paul has demonstrated in the Roman epistle that, like the other apostles, he understood the significance of Jesus’ insistence that He is the fulfillment of all that God had done throughout history and recorded in the pages of the Old Testament; all the Law, Prophets, and Writings do indeed testify of Him. Paul recognized that the fundamental structure of biblical revelation is *promise/fulfillment*: everything previous to Christ’s coming served to portray and anticipate Him and His redemptive work, and therefore finds its own ultimate fulfillment in Him. Stated differently, the New Testament is nothing more than the Old Testament read and understood in the light of the reality of Jesus Christ.

This principle of promise/fulfillment is easily shown to be foundational to Paul’s understanding and doctrine. At its heart, Paul’s message was simply his inspired interpretation of the “Christ event” as it represented the fulfillment of what God had revealed in the scriptures of the Old Testament. Paul had come to grasp the profound truth that all of the Old Testament predicted and promised Jesus Christ. *The Old Testament in its entirety constitutes the substance of the promise that has now been fulfilled in the incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement of the Son of God.* This is why when Paul preached Christ and His gospel, he did so, not from a few messianic passages, but from the very fabric of the Old Testament.

Regardless of the particular matter at hand, it must be addressed and resolved in terms of the fundamental structure of promise/fulfillment. And this is precisely what Paul did in answering the present issue, namely the problem of Israel in relation to the New Covenant gospel. The dilemma would only be solved through an understanding of God’s purpose in salvation history.

An abbreviated overview of Paul's argument in this context helps to show that this is the case:

1. The question Paul addresses here is the present and future place of Israel in God's purpose in light of the gospel age that Jesus has inaugurated. His focal concern is the matter of God's *covenant integrity*. Having insisted upon it in the preceding section (8:31-39), Paul understood that, for his Jewish readers at least, such an insistence could not help but raise in their minds the issue of God's previous commitment to Israel. How could the same covenant-keeping God cast off that nation when He had committed Himself to them by covenant (9:1-5)?
2. Paul proceeds to show that the answer to this question is grounded in recognizing the Israelite covenant as a matter of *promise*. Specifically, one must grasp the nature and true referents of God's covenant promise to Israel. ***From the outset Paul approaches the whole issue entirely from the vantage point of promise and fulfillment as they reveal and explain God's purpose and work in the movement of salvation history.*** This is the reason for his repeated interaction with the Old Testament throughout these chapters.
3. As to its nature and referents, Paul reveals that God's covenant promise is a matter of *sovereign choice*. This certainly had been the case with God's election of national Israel, which truth may appear at first glance to support the contention that God has indeed proven unfaithful in His covenant with the Jews. But reasoning from the principle of promise/fulfillment, Paul insists that nothing could be further from the truth (9:6-29).
4. Paul understood that God's covenant and relationship with national Israel were a matter of promise; they were *preparatory* and *prophetic*. Franz Delitzsch has rightly noted that everything in Israel's history – even the nation of Israel itself – was typological and therefore prophetic and promissory. Israel was to find its own fulfillment in another Israel; in another beloved servant-son who would be the reality behind the shadow.
5. Because Christ is the true Israel, He is the true covenant *seed of Abraham*, and so the true referent of God's covenant promise to him. God's promise to Abraham was that He would be the God of his offspring and that they would be His people. In the period of prophetic preparation, this promise was fulfilled in Abraham's physical seed. But Abraham was a man of *faith* who "saw Jesus' day," and from the inception of the covenant God increasingly revealed that Abraham's authentic offspring – and therefore the legitimate heirs of the promise – were those who shared his faith (9:30-10:21).
6. Paul's insistence that "not all Israel is Israel" thus finds its basis and proof in the fact that Jesus is the *true Israel*. As such, Israel finds its ultimate identity in Him. In that He is the seed of Abraham to whom the promise pertained (Galatians 3:16), the true "Israel" – those who share in the covenant promise to Abraham – consists of those individuals who are joined to the seed to whom belongs the promise (Galatians 3:15-29).
7. And so God has not in any way forsaken His people or broken His covenant commitment to Israel; on the contrary, the conviction that He *has* betrays a woeful misunderstanding of the principle of promise/fulfillment as realized in the gospel of Jesus Christ (11:1-32).