

Romans 9:19-29

Introduction

Chapter 9 discusses Israel's story. It deals with aspects of that story as it related to the Nationalistic Jewish Teacher's (NJT) concerns over the present rebellion of much of Israel against Paul's claim that Jesus is Messiah and the one through whom God fulfilled His promises to Israel. The NJT could not accept that Gentiles could fully participate in God's (Israel's) salvation-history without embracing God given Jewish identity markers. How was Paul's gospel true to God's intention for Israel? If Paul's gospel was true concerning Gentiles, what does it say about the faithfulness of God toward Israel? The NJT believed Paul's gospel taught that God's promise to Israel had been taken off God's intended course?

Earlier in chapter 9, Paul turned to some aspects of Israel's history that possibly were not being considered by the NJT. During the days of the patriarchs Israel's history included God's gracious choosing (Isaac, Jacob) and God's rejection (Ishmael, Esau), neither of which had anything to do with any standard of performance on the part of those chosen or those rejected. God's faithfulness to Israel in the Exodus included the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. The NJT would have loved most of this except for the part that stressed it had nothing to do with performance. But he would struggle with what follows. In the following section, Paul drew upon an image often used by the OT prophets, that of the potter and the clay. As the potter continually forms and reforms the clay to fulfill his purposes, God continually forms and reforms Israel, even during her rebellion.

The Objection: 9:19

It is understandable that the NJT would challenge how God could find fault with Pharaoh since the hardening was an act of God. Pharaoh had no chance to resist God's will.

The primary description of God in chapters 9-11 is one who is merciful. The hardening of Pharaoh fits within God's merciful purposes for Israel and the world. Before drawing any definitive conclusions about what is being said here, it needs to be understood that Paul did not even attempt to address the tension between God's sovereignty and the free will of humanity. To use this text to address this tension takes it away from Paul's discussion and can lead to some incorrect conclusions about sovereignty and free will. Such a discussion does not fit Paul's purpose here. Paul was discussing how God has worked through Israel and others in order to fulfill His promise to Israel and to reconcile the world to Himself. By doing this Paul was setting up his later discussion regarding the present hardening of much of Israel. The hardening of Israel will be described as temporary and as a way for God to bring His mercy to the Gentiles and eventually to Israel as well (11:25-32).

The Illustration of the Potter: 9:20-26

In the tone of an OT prophet, Paul turned to the very familiar image of a potter to explain what God was doing with and for Israel in salvation-history. The potter can make a pot for decorating the king's palace or to be used as a chamber pot. For the

clay to argue against the potter's purpose would be absurd. Paul will use Israel's history to show that the current situation (Israel's rebellion) was not unique.

Paul intended the NJT to consider the context of either or both Isa. 29:16 and 45:9 in his quote in verse 20 ("Why have you made me like this?"). In the Isa. 29 text, Jerusalem was facing an impending attack from the Assyrians because of their rebellion and heartless worship. Israel was treating the potter (God) as if He was the clay. Just as a potter with clay, God had caused a "spirit of deep sleep" (Isa 29:10) to come over Israel, out of which God would bring renewal. "And those who err in spirit will come to understanding, and those who grumble will accept instruction (29:22-24)."

The Isa. 45 text is about God's sovereignty ("who created the heavens" and "I am the LORD and there is no other," vs. 18) over all His creation including the Persian King Cyrus. Cyrus was being sent by God to send Israel's exiles back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. The text talks of earthen vessels (people) that strive with the potter proclaiming, (NRSV) "What are you making?" Later in the text are a number of proclamations concerning the renewal of Israel. "Israel is saved by the LORD with everlasting salvation; you will not be put to shame or confounded to all eternity" (v. 17). "In the LORD all the offspring of Israel shall triumph and glory" (v. 25).

Another major potter/clay text for Israel was Jeremiah 18:1-11. Jeremiah saw the potter take the clay that at first had been spoiled in the potter's hand and then rework it into a useful vessel. The Jeremiah text goes on to say that God can pluck up and break down and He can build and plant. What a potter at one point chooses to do with the clay is not irrevocable. The potter can and will alter his purposes for the clay.

In verses 22-23 Paul challenged the NJT to consider a scenario that would shed light on God's purposes. I will try to put what these verses are saying in a historical context. God could have justly delivered immediate judgment upon Pharaoh (the object of wrath, made for destruction) and could in that act have shown His glory, but what if His purpose would better be served by being patient with Pharaoh (going through the 10 plagues) so that the riches of His glory for Israel (objects of mercy) could be made known to all the world. Another one might read, "What if God could have demonstrated His power and wrath by destroying Israel (objects of wrath) at Mt. Sinai, but chose instead to be patient with them so He could make known the riches of His glory for Israel (objects of mercy) by preserving them in order to bring the second generation out of the wilderness into the promised land?"

In the previous observations, Paul was drawing the NJT into a trap. The NJT would have applauded all of Paul's points concerning God's gracious choice of Isaac over Ishmael and the hardening of Pharaoh in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The NJT would have seen Israel as the vessel created for honorable use and Pharaoh as the vessel created for ordinary purposes and destruction. But then Paul identified Gentiles as being objects of God's mercy in verses 23-24. Considering the previous discussion, it would have been difficult for the NJT to protest against God's sovereign right to show mercy to whomever He chooses because that is what the NJT would have boasted about in regards to God's gracious choosing of Israel.

The gracious calling of God that had been seen throughout Israel's history was again being seen in the midst of Israel's rebellion. The Hosea text in verses 25-26 was written during a time when Israel, because of her rebellion, had led to the temporary lost relationship of "not my children." But by God's patience and mercy Israel would be

reformed in the potter's hand so they would once again be called "my people." In Paul's day not only were Israelites who had embraced Jesus as Messiah recipients of God's merciful calling, the Gentile who had formerly been "not my people" were being called "my people." As God had called Israel, His purpose also included the gracious calling of Gentiles. Paul saw in Hosea a foreshadowing of the days of Gentile inclusion into covenant relationship apart from Torah. The striking reality that the NJT was being challenged to face is that those in Israel who were rejecting Jesus as Messiah were now objects of wrath. As will be seen later this is a temporary status. Israel's ability to experience the blessings of covenant relationship was now dependant upon God's patience and mercy.

A crucial point cannot be overlooked in the citation from Hosea. Mark Seifrid says it just right: Yet the very wording of the text of Hos 2:1b MT (1:10b ET) that Paul cites makes it clear that God's love and call follow rejection and judgment: it is the "Not-my-people" and the "Woman-not-loved" whom God again takes to himself. This note of saving reversal adds a profound turn to Paul's description of divine calling and rejection in the earlier part of the chapter. The rejected become the chosen.¹

The Remnant: 9:27-29

Paul found understanding and purpose in the prophets for the failure of many in Israel to embrace Jesus as Messiah. The language of remnant is very prominent in Jewish writings. It would be the remnant that God would return from captivity (Isa. 10:20-22), would recover (Isa. 11:11), or would gather (Jer. 23:3) so that His promise would be fulfilled. The NJT should not have been surprised that there might only be a remnant at that time that embraced Messiah.

The quotation in verse 27 is a mixture of Hos. 1:10 and Isa. 10:22-23. Both texts were written to the Northern tribes (Israel) during a time of their rebellion. Even though the physical descendants of Abraham were numerous (sands of the sea) as God had promised they would be, they were not all always faithful. But God always preserved a remnant for the purpose of fulfilling His promises. If God had not mercifully chosen to do so, Israel would have been extinct long before (like Sodom and Gomorrah). Then the promise would never have been fulfilled.

The statement in verse 28 is very difficult to interpret. The most difficult words to interpret in the context are the words the NRSV translates "quickly and decisively" and the NIV translates "with speed and finality." The most natural way to translate these words seems to be with the ideas of something being fulfilled or completed and being cut short or made concise. Our translations make a mistake by translating *logos* in this verse as "sentence" instead of translating it "word." Translators appear to want to make this about a judicial act of God (a la Martin Luther), whereas all three words; "word," "fulfilled," and "cut short" can be used in accounting terms. The word *logos* comes from the same root as the word "reckoned" (an accounting term: 4:5). *Logos* (word: in this case God's word) is found in 9:6 and 9:9 ("how the promise was *spoken*") in the context

¹ Mark Seifrid, "Romans" in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, ed. G.K. Beale and D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 647-48.

of God's being faithful to His word or promise. The meaning of verse 28 could be that God is keeping careful record of His word or what he has promised to Israel and is keeping careful account of the fulfillment of that word of promise. God's word both has been and will be fulfilled quickly. The current fulfillment of God's word (at the time of Paul's writing) to Israel's could be seen in the remnant that had embraced Jesus Messiah and by the inclusion of Gentiles, as spoken in Hosea and Isaiah. In the larger context of 9-11, the future fulfillment of God's word of promise will be seen in God's use of Gentiles to make Israel jealous (10:19; 11:1,14) so that they might be saved (11:14).

Conclusion

It is very important to keep focused on the context in which these comments from Paul were made. Paul's discussion in this text had nothing to do with some arbitrary proclamation from God about the final and eternal state of individuals. This conversation is about God's faithfulness to His promise to bless the world through Israel.

In response to the discussion of Pharaoh, the NJT continued to challenge Paul. If God can harden Pharaoh so that he can be used for God's purposes, how could God find any fault in someone like Pharaoh? Pharaoh was who God wanted him to be? The NJT's assumption is that if fault cannot be found with Pharaoh's rebellion, God cannot find fault with rebellious Israel.

Paul's first response was to remind the NJT that we are the creatures and God is the creator. We should be as humble in the hands of God as clay in the hands of a potter. There are many things going on with God's molding. God is patient toward those who are at times objects of God's wrath so that His riches of glory for the objects of mercy can be shown. In the past God was patient with Pharaoh in order to show His riches of glory for Israel.

The Hosea text that once spoke of rebellious Israel moving from being called "not my people" to being called "my people" was a typology of what God would do with Gentiles. God was being patient with rebellious Israel and was working through a remnant, as He had throughout Israel's history, to bring His mercy to the Gentiles. This was what the NJT's scripture had already stated.