

## APPENDIX II

### ROMANS 9-11 AND THE APOSTASY OF THE JEWS

Because it has served as the primary inspiration for so many discussions about predestination, it is necessary to examine here St. Paul's letter to the Romans, in particular its chapters 9 through 11. To begin with, it must be said plainly that Paul here is not discussing the question of man's salvation, nor the individual soul's relation to God and to His act of Predestination. For that reason, we must not look here for a precise expression of Paul's view of the role of man's will in salvation. Wherever Paul does speak about the salvation of the individual, he speaks always of sin, righteousness, love, and judgment, and he ever exhorts the reader to virtue and warns him against the danger of falling away from God through sin, all of which presuppose the essential importance of human choice and responsibility.<sup>1</sup>

What, then, is the purport of these chapters? It is, in short, an answer to the question of election, and confronts in particular the problem of the lapse of the Jews and the call of the Gentiles.<sup>2</sup> Paul here is seeking an explanation by using the rabbinic tool of *midrash*, that is, an exegesis of the Old Testament in order to solve a problem. For St. Paul, as for any first century Jew, the distinction between Jew and Gentile was paramount. From the Jewish perspective, the Gentiles were perpetually unclean, and so, for an observant Jew, it was "unlawful to associate with or visit anyone of another nation;"<sup>3</sup> they had no dealings with them beyond the most superficial interactions. Moreover, the Gentiles were estranged from the covenants and had no, or at best very limited, access to God, and they were outside His promises. Yet the fact that with the preaching of the Gospel, the majority of Jews ended up outside God's election and a great many Gentiles within, raised a very difficult question for the earliest Christians. Indeed, one of chief questions which most troubled the first generation of Christians was how the Jews could not only reject

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<sup>1</sup> As an example, see his analogy of the olive tree in this very section: Rom. 11:17-24.

<sup>2</sup> *cf.* also Eph 1-3, where he also discusses this theme at length.

<sup>3</sup> Acts 10:28

their Messiah, but murder Him, and then later fail to repent.<sup>4</sup> How could this happen without God's promise having failed and He Himself being shown a liar?

This question had to be answered, and in answering it, Paul had to show that the old Jewish understanding was wrong. The Jews held that, as they had the Law from God, those who were obedient to it and kept it (as even Paul claims to have done)<sup>5</sup> were righteous before God. Moreover, they alone had access to God's Temple and offered the sacrifices that were well-pleasing to God. They had also their physical descent from Abraham and the Patriarchs, the ones to whom the promises were made; this made them beloved of God for the sake of their fathers.<sup>6</sup> It was even a pious belief that, by living in perfect accordance with the Law, it was possible for them to hasten the coming of the Messiah. Israel was God's special possession. All this being the case, asked the Jew, how is it that God could reject us?

The Jewish understanding held that what God gave, He gave as a reward for the keeping of the Law, and the Law itself was the basis of man's relationship with God. But as Paul shows, it was not obedience to the Law that justified man before God, but faith in God's saving act in Christ Jesus.<sup>7</sup> Neither was it the merit of the Jews that won them the coming of the Messiah or earned them the salvation that came through Christ; rather, it was solely the mercy of God.<sup>8</sup> The role of the Jews may have been a necessary one in the preparation for the Incarnation of Christ, but this did not give the Jews a privileged position over other men.

St. Paul illustrates this with several examples from the Old Testament. He begins with Isaac. Like his half-brother Ishmael, Isaac was the offspring of Abraham. Though he was not the first-born, he was nonetheless the child of promise and was favoured over his older brother, and the people of Israel were reckoned through him alone. On the other hand, Ishmael's descendants, who were just as much the progeny of Abraham, were reckoned as Gentiles. Here we are speaking of the same father but of different mothers.

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<sup>4</sup> The other question was the relationship of the new Gentile converts to the Mosaic Law (*v.* Acts 15).

<sup>5</sup> *v.* Phil. 3:3-6

<sup>6</sup> According to Rabbinic teaching, they could even draw upon the merits (*zakuth*) of their fathers, which were stored up in a treasury for their descendants.

<sup>7</sup> This is the emphasis of the first eight chapters of Romans.

<sup>8</sup> This is the emphasis of chapters 9-11 of Romans.

One might infer from this that Ishmael was passed over simply because of who his mother was. For this reason, Paul continues his illustration with Jacob and Esau. Here we must speak not only of the same father, but also of the same mother, and what is more, of twins. Still, even though Esau was senior (if but barely), it was not through him but through Jacob that the Chosen People were reckoned. Again, the descendants of Esau were Gentiles and outside the covenant. By this, Paul shows that it is not a matter of simple genealogy<sup>9</sup> but of God's own choice, a choice which is not bound by human conventions or expectations. This tempts us to ask what both Isaac and Jacob did that led God to prefer them to their brothers? Paul's answer is nothing. "They were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad," Paul says, but it was "in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of His call."<sup>10</sup> In neither case did Isaac or Jacob do anything to deserve God's choice, for God had made his decision before either was even born.

Paul uses these examples to demonstrate that the Jewish understanding of deserving the promise and of security through physical descent was quite mistaken. Just as God chose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, so now He has chosen the Gentiles over Israel. In fact, according to Paul, God's preference for Isaac over Ishmael and for Jacob over Esau - in both cases for the second son over the firstborn - was a deliberate foreshadowing of His choosing the Gentiles in place of the elder race of the Jews.

So God has not lied, neither has the promise failed, for foreseeing the falling away of the Jews, it was His preëternal intention to bring the Gentiles into a saving relationship with Him. As in the other cases, the Gentiles have not done anything to merit being included in God's Chosen People, nor were they somehow more deserving than the Jews. Rather, it was on account of God's own mysterious and inscrutable design, whereby everything is shown to be of God's mercy. For though previously the Jews were obedient through the Law while the Gentiles were disobedient, now it is the Gentiles who are obedient through faith in God's mercy and the Jews who are disobedient. In this way,

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<sup>9</sup> An assumption often made by the Jews of his day; *v.* Matt. 3:9.

<sup>10</sup> Rom. 9:11

God has shown all men to be sinners, even His own Chosen People through their rejection of the Messiah, in order that all may know that they are in need of His mercy.<sup>11</sup>

Thus Paul stresses that God's relationship with man is always based on grace, and that our salvation is an act of His mercy alone. Law tries to merit recompense, but Faith accepts mercy.<sup>12</sup> Only God can save; and His salvation comes only through Jesus Christ as a mercy and a grace. It is never a question of deserving salvation, for nobody, neither the religious nor the irreligious, can deserve it. All they can do is accept it when offered, and live according to it once accepted.

Paul's discussion of predestination in the ninth through eleventh chapters of Romans, then, has as its context the mysterious design of God whereby He has seemingly rejected the Jews and accepted the Gentiles. It is his answer to a pressing dilemma, wherein he demonstrates that this event, far from being unforeseen by God, was intended by Him from the beginning, so that He could offer salvation to all men, both Jew and Greek, on the same basis, that of faith. His purpose here, therefore, is not to discuss or explain why it is that some men believe and are saved, while others do not believe and are condemned, nor is it meant to assert, as some would hold, that it is God who determines, apart from man's own choice, who will be saved and who condemned. Indeed, this passage does not discuss the personal standing of any of these men – Ishmael, Isaac, Esau or Jacob – before God, but only the collective salvation of the Jews and the Gentiles.

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Nonetheless, it is possible to draw some conclusions about the predestination of individuals from this passage, especially chapter 9, verses 14-24, for some of Paul's language there does seem to have a bearing on the relationship between God's choice and man's freedom. God says that He will have mercy on whomever He will have mercy, and that out of the same lump of humanity, He has made both vessels of mercy – those whom He has predestined – and vessels of wrath. But on what basis does He distinguish the one from the other? These verses are not explicit in answering this; rather, they are meant to

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<sup>11</sup> Rom. 11:30-32

<sup>12</sup> "Who has given a gift to God that he might be repaid?" (Rom. 11:35).

emphasize once again that the initiative is God's. This is where some are most tempted to think the answer is God's own inscrutable choice and that man has no contribution.<sup>13</sup> But it is best to take our answer from the Apostle where he is explicit, in the previous chapter. There he answers that the basis of God's choice is His foreknowledge.<sup>14</sup>

What the Apostle emphasizes here is that God's calling is gratuitous, it is never earned; and that, in His providence, He even makes use, for the accomplishment of His own gracious purpose, of those who fall outside His election. And so everyone, both he who purifies himself from what is ignoble and becomes thereby a vessel for noble use,<sup>15</sup> as well as he who makes of himself a vessel of wrath fitted only for destruction, is encompassed in His preëternal plan.

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Israel was clothed in purple and fine linen, arrayed in the glory of priestly and royal garments; rich in the Law and the Prophets, it rejoiced in the worship of the Mosaic Law. But it crucified Thee outside the gates, O Benefactor who hadst made Thyself poor, and it rejected Thee when Thou didst return alive after the Crucifixion, O Thou who art ever in the bosom of God the Father. Israel thirsts now for a single drop of grace, like the rich man clothed in purple and fine linen, who showed no mercy to Lazarus in his poverty, and so was punished in the fire which shall never be quenched. Israel is filled with anguish as it looks upon the people of the Gentiles, who once lacked even the very crumbs of truth. But now they are comforted in the bosom of the faith of Abraham; they wear the purple of Thy Blood and the fine linen of Baptism; and they make glad and rejoice in Thy gifts of grace, saying: O Christ our God, glory to Thee.

*- Matins Aposticha of Wednesday in the Week of Palms*

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<sup>13</sup> v. Appendix I

<sup>14</sup> v. Rom 8:29

<sup>15</sup> v. II Tim 2:20-21