

THE MISAPPLICATION OF ROMANS 9 TO PREDESTINARIAN VIEWS

by Ray Faircloth

WHAT IS PREDESTINARIANISM?

In its ultimate Calvinistic form this doctrine states that there are particular individuals who have been predetermined from “before the foundation of the world” by God to be saved. This carries the implication that all the rest of mankind are predetermined never to be saved and such ones are earmarked for either suffering eternal torment in hellfire or for complete destruction so that they go out of existence forever. This belief further entails the concept that individuals have no genuine free will in the matter of their personal salvation.

Often Chapter nine of Romans is appealed to in support of this doctrine. It is our contention that this chapter is not only not about predestinarianism; but that it in no way supports it.

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.

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

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. *Wrestling with Romans*, p.116.

THE RELATED ISSUES AND PAUL'S THEME IN ROMANS 9

Now the Chapter 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). Robinson notes 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. *Wrestling with Romans*, p.115.

In fact, as we shall see, Romans 9-11 is **not primarily about the choosing of individuals** but about the choosing or election of those *peoples* that he 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

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 descendants 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

Paul shows that the idea that physical descent from Abraham through the slave girl Hagar does not establish the basis for a 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’ (Gen. 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 [seed].”

Paul here introduces the contrary terms: “*the children of the flesh*” and “*the children of the promise*” and that the latter “are regarded as descendants [seed].” - **the children of God**, Paul now demonstrates that God makes a choice even though parentage is through the same mother i.e. Isaac’s wife.

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 from before the foundation of the world. It was when Jacob was in his *conceived state*.

But Paul is now beginning to show that it is up to God to decide who constitutes his chosen people. He 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 in an attempt to prove **individual predestination from before the foundation of the world**, which is 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”?

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.

There is **nothing in these verses to suggest that men believe because God compels them to**. Or that His will is irresistible in the matter of salvation. Hence there is no predestinarian concept at work in this part of this illustration concerning the selection of Jacob.

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.**”

Yet 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 **freewill**. 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.

So this first illustration gives no support to the predestinarian teaching. In short, verse 16 means that **humans cannot choose themselves to become the ones by means of which God fulfils His purpose**. It is only God who makes such choices.

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.”

Regarding vessels of mercy and vessels of wrath mentioned later by Paul, 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.

**NO DENIAL OF FREEWILL - PHARAOH PARTICIPATED
IN HARDENING HIS OWN HEART**

Verse 18:

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

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.

Exodus 4:21 shows that:

“I [God] will harden his heart, so that he will not let the people go”

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:

Exodus 8:15:

“...when **Pharaoh** saw there was relief, **he hardened his heart.**” Also verse 32 and 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’s “digging his heals in.”

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

Hebrews 3:8 and 4:7: “Do not harden your hearts...”

Hebrews 3:13b: “so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

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 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 concerns His **overall purpose**. Certainly individuals have the freewill 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:

Acts 7:51:

“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.”

Luke 7:30:

“But the Pharisees and the lawyers **rejected God’s purpose for themselves**, not having been baptized by John.”

So, as with verse 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**?"

For this illustration Paul quotes Isaiah 29:16 and 45:9, but also likely draws upon the object lesson in:

Jeremiah 18:3-5:

"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?'"

Application of the illustration is made in Jeremiah 18:8 where God says:

"...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.

THE FURTHERING OF GOD'S PURPOSE

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..."

WHO ARE THE VESSELS?

Firstly "the same lump" refers to: *the nation of Israel as natural descendants of the Patriarchs (see Rom. 11:16)*.

Then JAT Robinson tells us 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.

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. So too, these vessels do not represent individuals as Robinson noted.

NOT IRRIVERISIBLE

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

Verse 25 shows the possibility of role reversal:

“I will call those who are not my people, ‘My people,’ and her who was not beloved, ‘Beloved.’”

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.

But doesn’t the use of the word *vessels* (plural) 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? Even if this passage concerned individuals, which it does not, they are not prepared for destruction by God. Paul shows that it is largely up to the individual whether or not he wants to be a vessel for an honourable use:

2 Timothy 2:21:

“...if anyone *cleanses himself* from what is dishonourable, he will be a vessel for honourable use...”

Acts 13:46:

“...since you repudiate it [*the word of God*] and judge **yourselves** unworthy of eternal life...”

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. However, 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 as stated in:

Romans 11:25:

“...that a partial **hardening** has happened to Israel **until** the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and all Israel will be saved.”

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 predestinating of them from before the foundation of the world.