

A Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans [9]

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Chapter 9:1-33: Israel in Salvation History and the Good News of Christ

Introduction: Romans chapter 8, we can say, is the climax of the letter and in chapters 9-11 Paul elaborates themes he already introduced in previous chapters: Israel, Law, Faith and Justification. After establishing the truth about Christian existence in the Spirit in chapter 8, the sentiments and arguments in chapter 9 focus on Israelites. Here Paul expresses his great anguish for his fellow Jewish people and try to grasp Israel's rejection of Christ from God's perspective, arguing from scriptures. Why did gentiles [non-Israelites] welcome the gospel and Israelites did not? [unfortunately, this chapter has been used by many Christians to hold anti-Semitic positions]. What was God doing with Israel by manifesting himself to them and entering into a covenant with them? Israel's election cannot be seen as an already accomplished deal. Paul is not a traitor to his own people. His encounter with Christ has given him the light to understand Christ and his gospel, the fulfilment of promise made to Israel. Christ is justification [salvation] for both Israel and gentiles.

Verses 1-5: Paul's Anguish: in the depth of his sorrow, Paul wishes to be cut off from Christ [or made insignificant], and he is even willing to be 'damned' for the sake of his people, if that would some how persuade his people to accept Christ. This saying echoes Moses prayer to take his name out of God's 'book of life', if only God would forgive Israel's sins [Exodus 32:32]. This saying is particularly amazing from Paul who previously said, 'nothing can separate me from the love of Christ' and just shows the intensity of his love for his people. Not able to fully grasp Israel's rejection of Christ, Paul goes on to explain the richness of Israel's religious traditions sanctioned by God's self-revelation! Paul here mentions his people as 'Israelites' and not as ethnic Jews. 'Israel' [wrestled with God] was the name given to Jacob [Exodus 32:29], and it became the name of the undivided nation of Israel comprised of the twelve tribes of Israel, who were gathered and chosen to worship the God of the fathers.

Seven Prerogatives of Israel: 1. Israel's 'sonship': Israel is often addressed by God as 'son'. Isaiah 1:2, 'the Lord has spoken: sons have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me'; Jeremiah 3:19: 'I thought, how I would set you among my sons...'; Hosea 11:1 'When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son'. Israel was a historical people entrusted with a mission. 2. Recipients of glory: this is referred to the Exodus event [liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt through Moses] and the Temple in Jerusalem, considered as Kabod Yahweh [the indwelling presence/glory of God with his people]. 3. Covenant: This is Israel's special relationship with God and the promises they received through their fathers ['you shall be my people and I will be your God', Jeremiah 30:22]. Israel was historically positioned to enter into the new covenant in Christ because of their old covenants.

4. Law: Law was originally given as a blessing. They contain instructions/commandments to know the will of God and live as covenant people. 5. Worship of One God: this is in contrast to pagan worship of idols. God revealed himself to Israel through Moses as Yahweh [I am who am]

in Exodus 3:14. 6. Promise: this is part of the covenant made to Abraham [Genesis 12:2, 'I will bless you and make you a great nation']. 7. Patriarchs [fathers]: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the patriarchs of Israel from whom Israel received its name and identity as people of God. Finally, the coming of Christ was the fulfilment of promise to Israel. In verse 5, Paul defines Christ as one who holds together 'All', who is God, a clear attribution of divinity to Christ. Israel's covenant, the promises given and their calling as a chosen people, all were leading to Christ. This was the action of God and for that God be praised!

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