

Chapter

13

Justification Through Jesus Christ

The reader may now be persuaded—at least encouraged to consider—that Paul does not have the negative theological view of “works” that is typically ascribed to him. Yet, if I am to demonstrate that Paul ultimately does not oppose human action to human faith, it is critical to explain what Paul means by “justification by faith,” since Paul does say that one is “justified by faith” and not “works of the law.” How can I possibly claim that Paul is not setting the two in opposition?

The answer is relatively simple: The Pauline notion of justification by faith does not mean that one is justified by one’s own faith in Jesus; rather, Jesus’ faithfulness puts right Gentiles and incorporates them into the family of God.¹ The closest there is to a description of Jesus’ faithful obedience in Paul’s letters appears in a hymn that Paul quotes in Philippians:

*In Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself*

*and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross. (Phil 2:5–8, NRSV)²*

This for Paul is what Jesus did to atone for the sins of Gentiles and restore the relationship between the whole human family and God. It must remain something of a mystery exactly why Paul (and presumably other followers of Jesus) came to understand this particular act by this particular individual as able to achieve this profound reconciliation, but it is what Paul believed, and it is what he preached. Jesus’ death was evidently seen as effecting atonement, and part of this atonement was achieved by the fact that Jesus was *obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross*. In going to his death, Jesus is the primary actor. Obedience to God requires him to make a sacrifice of himself. It is this great act of faithfulness that works to extend God’s grace to the Gentiles. Just as Abraham and the patriarchs’ great acts of faithfulness enabled Israel to enjoy God’s grace through the merit of the fathers, so, too, Jesus’ faithfulness means that God will look favorably upon the nations and not hold them accountable for their accumulated sin. It was not Israel’s faith *in* Abraham that allowed her to enjoy God’s favor, but the faith *of* Abraham. The same kind of theological system is at work with Jesus and the Gentiles.³

At the same time, Jesus’ obedience is a model for others, as was the case with Abraham. It is not as if a follower of Jesus has nothing to do in response to God’s grace. But that response is one of emulating the same kind of faithfulness that Jesus demonstrated, not having faith *in* Jesus the way that would later become essential for Christians.⁴ For Paul, emulating Jesus’ faithfulness meant not just trusting in God’s promises; it meant acting in such a way as to realize those promises. Paul’s mission was all about working to bring about those promises of God, and that was what he wanted others to do. God promised that all the nations would be blessed in Abraham, which Paul interpreted in light of the eschatological traditions about the ingathering of the nations—which Paul thought was imminent—and this in turn is why his message has such urgency. God’s kingdom is coming. God’s justice is coming. The Roman imperial order will be overturned. The faithful response is to act in accord with God’s will in bringing about the kingdom. Just as the gift of Torah required a faithful response from Israel, the gift of Jesus required a faithful response from Gentiles. Belief, insofar as it is a kind of mental assent to a particular

theological doctrine, is not what Paul meant by faith, and it was not simply belief that would ensure one's justification.

Paul contrasts faith and works in order to demonstrate that Gentiles are off the hook for law observance. Like Israel, they are the beneficiaries of God's grace. The observance of Torah is not required of Gentiles in order for them to be righteous before God, in order for them to become part of God's family, in order for them to be part of the world to come, "saved" in Christian language. The death and resurrection of Jesus has achieved the reconciliation between Gentiles and God that was envisioned by Israel's prophets. To put it boldly, Jesus saves, but he only saves Gentiles. By that I do not mean that Paul believed that Jesus is irrelevant for Jews. Paul hoped his fellow Jews would eventually recognize the cosmic significance of Jesus as marking the beginning of the messianic age. But the significance was not that Jews needed to be saved from their sins. The efficacy of Jesus' sacrificial death was for the forgiveness of the sins of the nations. The Gentiles, who were once idolaters, are forgiven for their sins, which have been building up (see Rom 3:25). They now stand righteous (=justified), ready to become children of God, heirs to the Abrahamic promises, possessed of the same status as Israel, heirs according to the promise (see Rom 4:20).

It may help the reader to grasp the significance of this interpretation of justification by faith by restating the traditional view. The starting assumption is that human beings must be righteous in God's sight in order to be saved. God does not save unrighteous people, for that would compromise the notion that God is just. Luther came to believe that a human being could not do anything to achieve the righteousness necessary to be saved, *except* having faith in Jesus Christ.⁵ The Christian believer in Jesus is completely passive. For Luther, humans "are not capable of initiating, or collaborating with, the process leading to justification."⁶ Justification is bestowed upon the Christian through God's grace and mercy.⁷

There is no question that grace plays a critical role in Paul's thinking. But the position advocated in this book is markedly different from the traditional interpretation. The best way to begin to differentiate my position from the traditional understanding is to clarify the way in which the Pauline expressions "faith in Christ" and "the righteousness of God" mean very different things in the interpretation being put forward here from the standard Protestant position.

We have already discussed in chapter 10 the debate over whether the expression *pistis christou* means "faith in Christ," as it is typically translated, or "faith (or faithfulness) of Christ."⁸ Following the important work of Sam Williams, Lloyd Gaston, Richard Hays, and others, I argued for the latter interpretation and translate the phrase "faithfulness of Christ." This means that the term "faith" in the phrase "justification by faith" refers not to the believers' faith, but to Jesus' own faith. To put it another way, the phrase "justification by faith" says nothing about what believers must do; it only refers to what Jesus already did. It is Jesus' own act of faith that makes others righteous.

A similar kind of issue affects the interpretation of the phrase "the righteousness of God," although the issue is not as obvious. Unlike *pistis christou*, the phrase *dikaiosyne theou* is almost always translated "righteousness of God." Luther came to believe that the phrase did not refer to God's own righteousness, but rather to righteousness that God imputes to humanity, and thus what humans possess if they believe in Jesus Christ. Romans 3:22 is critical here; the NRSV reads "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe." In this context and with this translation, the phrase ostensibly implies that the righteousness of God is something ascribed to humans through their belief in Jesus. If we translate *pistis christou* as "faith in Christ," then Romans 3:22 requires that the "righteousness of God" not refer to God's own righteousness, but to the righteous status of human beings that God has bestowed on the believer because of his or her faith. In other words, traditional interpreters understand Romans 3:22 as just another way of saying that a person is justified by his or her faith in Jesus. The phrase, however, is better understood as referring to God's own righteousness.⁹ Thus, when Paul tells us that "the righteousness of God has been made manifest through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ," he means it is through the faithful act of Jesus that God's righteousness has been made known. Grammatically, both should be understood as subjective genitives (discussed in chapter 10). The "righteousness of God" means God's own righteousness, and the "faithfulness of Jesus Christ" refers to Jesus' faithful act of obedience in willingly going to his death on the cross.

Whether these two phrases should be considered objective or subjective genitives may seem like a minor, technical issue of translation, but a great deal is at stake for understanding justification by faith, for

understanding how it relates to law, and ultimately for understanding Christianity's relationship to Judaism. If justification by faith points to Jesus' faithfulness, then the centuries-long understanding of the opposition between Christ and the law no longer stands. For that opposition was predicated on the person's attitude toward these things. "Faith" meant a person's faith in Christ, and "law" meant a person's observance of Torah. Furthermore, each of these represented a theological extreme used to evaluate any religion. Christianity represented faith and was of course at the top; Judaism represented law and was at the bottom. Any form of religion that advocated the performance of certain actions as a way of becoming righteous was a bad form of religion. Sixteenth-century Roman Catholicism, in the eyes of Luther, was just that sort of bad religion, but Judaism remained the ultimate paradigm of bad religion.

What then is the distinction between faith and law? First, we should note that Paul never puts faith and law in direct opposition; the contrast is stated as "faith" versus "works of law," where "works of law" refers to the requirements of the law.¹⁰ Second, and more important, Paul is speaking to Gentiles. One must always keep this in mind: Gentiles, Gentiles, Gentiles! Paul's point is simply that while Jews' possession of Torah enabled them to stay in good stead with God, this is not true of Gentiles. What the Torah does for Jews, Jesus does for Gentiles. The significance of the opposition that Paul describes is not an ontological difference between faith in Jesus and observance of Torah, but rather the differing situations of Jews and Gentiles as history comes hurtling to a close.

While Torah has been the unique possession of Jews, it represents the standard to which everyone is accountable, at least theoretically. Gentiles should have known enough to live by God's law, even if they weren't there when God handed the Torah to Moses. We have already seen that in Paul's view human nature is not hopelessly depraved. Everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, has the same capacity to do good or to do evil (see Rom 2:20). Jews may have been "entrusted with the oracles of God" (Rom 3:2), but all people are morally accountable—that is, accountable to God's law, and God's law *is* Torah. Jews do not have any special moral nature that sets them apart from Gentiles; both they and Gentiles are held morally accountable. As Paul says in Romans, "God shows no partiality" (2:11), by which Paul means that God has

the same moral standard for both Jews and Gentiles. But Israel enjoys a covenantal relationship with God that has enabled Jews to maintain the appropriate moral status. That is not to say that Israel did not behave badly at times, sometimes very severely and arguably often, as we know from numerous biblical stories and the indictments against the people by prophets like Jeremiah. But because of God's eternal commitment to Israel—exemplified by divine promises made to Abraham, David, and others—God has ensured that Israel will always be put right. Gentiles, on the other hand, have not been "in" the covenant with God, and thus Torah has not "worked" for Gentiles; they're outside the system. That is why the expiating death of Jesus is necessary. So when Paul says that the law does not justify Gentiles, it is not because humans are, in principle, incapable of observing law and being righteous thereby, or that the obligations of Torah in a general sense do not apply to Gentiles. In theory, Gentiles are capable of observing Torah, as Paul explains in Romans 2–3. But because they have been outside the system for so long, there is now a huge chasm that must be bridged (see Rom 1:20). Up to this point, there has been no atonement, no rectification for Gentiles. That is why God's wrath has been building up against them. Now it's time to pay. In other words, as the end of history approaches and all the nations are gathering together in peace and harmony to worship the one God, the issue of accountability is much greater for Gentiles, collectively speaking, than it is for Jews. What God has done in Jesus resolves the predicament of Gentiles.

Here is where grace comes in, and it plays a critical role in Paul's thinking. Paul's emphasis on grace in his letters to the Romans and Galatians is due to his emphasis on Gentiles, though Paul relies on traditional Jewish theology for his concept of grace. Indeed, in order to grasp the role of grace for Gentiles, one first needs to understand the role of grace for Israel. From Paul's point of view (as for any other Jew of the day), Israel has had the long-standing advantage of being chosen as God's "treasured possession," which put her in a position of privilege vis-à-vis the other nations.¹¹ To put the matter concretely, God made a covenant with Israel that was unique, and that covenant was manifest in the Torah. By manifest I mean more than just that the Torah was the physical document that contained the regulations to which Israel was obliged. The Torah expressed the nature of the relationship between God and Israel, and that relationship was characterized by love and an

eternal bond on the part of both parties. Once Israel and God made the covenant, the requirements of the Torah that God asked of Israel and that Israel pledged to keep were an expression of Israel's devotion to God. And God's promises, that Israel would never be abandoned and that she would eventually be redeemed, were the expression of God's love for Israel. The perfect performance of each and every commandment was not a requirement for each individual member of Israel to be a beneficiary of God's promises. Atonement, on the other hand, *was* an integral part of the covenant. That the people should demonstrate their faithfulness to God through the observance of Torah was of course expected, but this was their *response* to God in light of their possession of the covenant. As E. P. Sanders said, "the covenant was not earned, but . . . obedience to the commandments is the consequence of the prior election of Israel by God." He goes on to cite a passage from the Talmud:

R. Joshua b. Karha said: "Why does the section, *Hear, O Israel* (Deut 6:4–9) precede the [section] *And it shall come to pass if ye shall hearken [diligently to my commandments]*?—so that a man may first take upon him the yoke of the kingdom of heaven and afterward take upon him the yoke of the commandments. (*Bera-koth* 2.2)¹²

In other words, one is first a subject in the kingdom of heaven, and then one is subject to the commandments. Faith first, works second. It's classic Jewish theology, which makes Paul's argument about faith something less than unique.

To be sure, this did not mean that each and every person, no matter their behavior, was guaranteed redemption. For persistent faithlessness would mean that one was no longer participating in the covenant. But Israel as a people was guaranteed redemption. If a majority of Israel became faithless, then God would retain a remnant so as to ensure the continuation of the covenant and the fulfillment of promises. Sanders put it this way:

Although God would punish disobedience and although intentional rejection of God's right to command implied rejection of the covenant, the Rabbis did not have the view that God's covenant

with Israel was conditional on obedience in the sense that the covenantal promises would be revoked by God because of Israel's sin. The covenant is, in this sense, unconditional, although it clearly implies the obligation to obey.¹³

My point in rehearsing the relationship between the election of Israel, the covenant, and the observance of commandments is to demonstrate that Israel belongs to God on the basis of grace, not because of obedience. Paul knows that, and that theological reality is a critical part of his argument that Gentiles will now be reconciled to God through grace. Exactly why God did choose Israel was as much a mystery to ancient Jewish writers—who imagine a variety of different midrashic explanations—as it is to modern readers. But the very mysteriousness of the reason points to its being an act of grace—for no one really knows why God chose Israel; God just did.

Moreover, Paul's working assumption is that Jews are already benefiting from grace. I said before that Paul's problem was not the inherent theological inadequacy of the law, but what to do about the nations who had not had the benefit of it. But my point in saying this is not that Jews knew the rules and Gentiles didn't, but that Jews already enjoyed God's grace while Gentiles did not. Jews could be confident of their status as righteous before God. Individual wrongdoing does not matter as long as one remained faithful to God as a matter of principle (not as a matter of details). God has committed to forgive Israel her sins. Jews are "justified" by virtue of the covenant. On the other hand, since Gentiles have been outside the covenant, *their* wrongdoings will count against them at the final judgment without some kind of divine intervention.

Paul's message is that God has now extended grace to Gentiles. The apostle's pounding on about grace is not because he himself had never experienced God's grace as a Pharisee and he found it in his experience of Jesus. Paul knew of grace firsthand as a member of Israel, and now that history was coming to its cataclysmic end, Paul wanted to extend the same grace Israel had enjoyed to Gentiles. It was time for the ingathering of the nations, and Jesus, in his obedience, had accomplished what was necessary for Gentiles to participate; their sins would be forgiven, and they would be ready to stand before their Maker and Judge.

The most important passage for understanding Paul's message to Gentiles—arguably the most important passage in Paul's letters—is Romans 3:21–30. Many if not most interpreters of Paul see this as the thesis or the center of Paul's argument in Romans.¹⁴ It is certainly the case that in this one passage the reader may see in the text the interpretation of Paul's message being put forward here in all its aspects: that the "faithfulness of Christ" and "the righteousness of God" are subjective genitives, that Paul's message of justification by faith is targeted specifically to Gentiles, because they are the ones in need of it, and that God's action through Jesus was a gift that enables Gentiles to experience that same grace Jews already enjoyed. Here is my translation:

Now, however, apart from Torah, the righteousness of God has been made manifest to which the (same) Torah and the prophets gave witness; [namely,] the righteousness of God (which has come) through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all those who are faithful. For there is no distinction. For all have sinned and lack the glory of God. But they are justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus whom God presented as a means of expiation through [Jesus' act of] faith with his blood in order to demonstrate his righteousness, because, in his forbearance God passed over the sins previously committed, for the sake of demonstrating his righteousness at this very moment, that he may be shown to be just, and that he justifies the one who is (born) of the faithfulness of Jesus. Whence comes boasting? It is excluded. Through which law? Of works? Of course not! Rather, through the law of faithfulness. For we maintain that a person is justified by faithfulness, without works of Torah. Or does God belong to Jews alone? Does God not also belong to Gentiles? Indeed, to Gentiles also. Since God is one, it is he who justifies the circumcised out of [his] faithfulness [to the covenant] and the uncircumcised through faithfulness [of Jesus]. Do we then render Torah void through faithfulness? God forbid! On the contrary, we uphold the Torah!¹⁵

Building on my translation, I offer a paraphrase of this passage below, one which I hope will bring together all the elements necessary to the understanding of Paul's message that I have argued for throughout this book. Remember, the letter is addressed to Gentiles. Paul makes

comparisons to the status of Israel and the role of Torah, but the point he is making concerns the salvation of Gentiles. In essence, he is describing the ingathering of the nations at the culmination of history, assuring his Gentile audience that they will be part of redemption, while clarifying for them the ongoing inclusion of Jews in this same redemption:

The righteousness of God has been made manifest outside of the covenant between God and Israel, though this righteousness was foretold in the Scriptures. Specifically, this righteousness has been made manifest through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ and is available to anyone who demonstrates faithfulness themselves. For ultimately there is no distinction between people. All have sinned and lack the glory God intended for humans. But now all the Gentiles are righteous by the gift of God's grace. That is to say, they have redemption through Christ Jesus, whom God presented as a means of expiation (through Jesus' faithfulness evident in his obedience unto death) in order to prove his righteousness. In forbearance God held back from punishing the nations for their accumulated sin, for the sake of demonstrating that now, at the end of time, he is righteous, proving that he is just and that he justifies those who have been reborn through their baptism in Jesus.

No one has the right to boast of having the advantage over the other. Were Jews ever made righteous before God merely by fulfilling the requirements of Torah? Of course not! Rather it's been through our trusting in God. For we know that for anyone to be righteous in God's sight, that one must be faithful above all else—must trust in God's promises—and this is true whether or not the person fulfills the requirements of Torah. Or does God belong exclusively to Jews? Isn't God the God of Gentiles also? Of course! For God is one. Therefore God justifies Israel because of God's faithfulness to the covenant, and God also justifies the Gentiles by means of Jesus' faithfulness.

Has Jesus' act of faith rendered the covenant between God and Israel meaningless? God forbid! On the contrary, we who are members of Israel are fulfilling the prophecies of Torah by acknowledging God's redemption of the whole world.

Chapter

14

It's the End of the World as We Know It

Making sense of Paul's letters is a tricky business. Paul is complicated, and Pauline scholarship is even more complicated. There is much more that could be said, and I am confident the conversation about Paul will continue long after this book. I look forward to participating in that continuing conversation. Even the scholars who have most influenced my work—Krister Stendahl, Lloyd Gaston, John Gager, Stanley Stowers, Neil Elliott, and Mark Nanos—will disagree with me on many of the details of my reading of Paul. What we share, however, is the same basic orientation toward Paul, and that orientation involves more than a new perspective; it's a radical new perspective. Indeed, it's a new paradigm.¹

As longtime students of Paul know, I have left unexplained many statements in Paul's letters that still need explaining. Put another way, even those who have been convinced to step into this new paradigm or who are at least sympathetic to it will ask, What about this text? How do you explain that verse? I admit that there remain a few stubborn passages, but really very few. What is more, there were stubborn texts in the old paradigm, like "the doers of the law will be justified." In fact, I would say there were more of them. In my experience of reading Paul with students, most of the texts that befuddle them befuddle them because they're not really inside the new paradigm. In most cases, they're willing and open to it, but nearly two thousand years of reading Paul in the traditional Christian paradigm gets in the way. It is very hard to change paradigms; it usually takes a long time.

One of the texts that remains to be addressed is Romans 9–11. It is the *locus classicus* for most of us who have adopted this radical new perspective on Paul, but it's also a text that presents challenges. One reason I did not treat it in this book is because there are several good discussions of it already.² Another is that it would have required another book. For the sake of manageability, I have tried to stick with more narrowly defined units of texts. Paul's argument in Romans 9–11 is very complicated, with many twists and turns, and to do justice to it would have required a lot more discussion. Nevertheless, some would say that I have cheated by not addressing these very important chapters of Romans.

Therefore, before I let the reader go, I feel compelled to answer a question that has been raised by the radical-new-perspective interpretation of Romans 9–11 and that will no doubt be asked of me by colleagues and others who have followed the developments in the new ways of reading Paul. It is the question of "two-ways salvation." Two-ways salvation is a designation used to critique the interpretation of Romans 9–11 offered by some radical-new-perspective scholars. It refers to the view that interprets Paul as saying there are two different ways to salvation, Torah for Jews, Jesus for Gentiles. The charge of "two-ways salvation" is meant to suggest incredulity that Paul would have ever envisioned more than one way to salvation. Paul's commitment to Christ is so all-encompassing that he never would have intended to say any such thing. The implication of the charge is that if this is the logical conclusion of this radically new way of looking at Paul, then it cannot be right, because Paul couldn't possibly be saying that there are two ways to salvation.

In the previous chapter, "Justification Through Jesus Christ," I said that Jesus saves, but he saves only Gentiles. By making that claim, many will read this book as an endorsement of the view that Paul is saying there are two different ways to salvation. So for those who want an answer to the question, Does Paul really think there are two ways to salvation? my answer is yes, for those who see Paul from within the traditional paradigm; it is no for those in the new paradigm.

The problem is the question itself. It presupposes the old way of looking at things. The question that underlies the question of two-ways salvation is, How can I be saved? Since the "I" in this question must necessarily be either Jew or Gentile—or to translate it into later Christian language, Jewish (or some other religion) or Christian—then

it follows that there must be two ways to salvation if one accepts the radical new perspective. The traditional interpreters look at the new interpreters and say, "Are you serious? You think Paul thought the answer to this question is Torah if I'm a Jew and Jesus if I'm not?" When put in these terms, it sounds as though God had two entirely different plans for how to reconcile each group, two different standards for achieving their salvation, and two independent means for each of them to get there. Seemingly, they are on two parallel, nonintersecting tracks to heaven and, to take it to the absurd, two distinct spaces in heaven when they get there.

The starting assumption of the new paradigm is that it is not about personal salvation. Paul's letter to the Romans is not an answer to the question, How can I be saved? Rather, it is his answer to the question, How will the world be redeemed, and how do I faithfully participate in that redemption? For Paul the question had great urgency, since God had already initiated the process of redemption.

People should not be passive recipients of salvation; they need to be participants in the process. There is no doubt that Paul envisions the world's being redeemed as one world. And redemption certainly includes putting the whole world right, Jews, Gentiles, everybody. But part of being put right means faithfully participating in the redemption under way, and there is no reason why the participants all need to have the same role to be faithful participants. Paul sees his own mission as his participating in redemption, but not everyone has to do what he is doing.

The rabbis did not think non-Jews needed to observe all the commandments of the Torah to be redeemed—in fact, they are decidedly not to observe many of them. The rabbis envisioned the Gentiles' adhering to a small subset of law, known as the Noahide code. Yet the rabbis did not think this counted as two separate ways to salvation. Both groups are supposed to be in concord with the will of God, both are called to obedience, and in their different roles, both are being faithful to the Torah. There are different components that encompass redemption and different stages in realizing it, and those different stages may affect people differently or require them to play different roles, but that does not mean there are two different systems of redemption. As Krister Stendahl said in response to the question of two-ways salvation, it is God's "traffic plan" for how redemption is realized.³

Moreover, Paul's description of the culmination of history is not a description of how each and every individual person gets "saved." Paul speaks corporately. Luther, and millions of Christians since, may have seen Romans as the answer to the question, How can *I* be saved? But that is not Paul's question. Paul's question is, Now that the end of time is at hand, how will God reconcile all people, Jews and Gentiles, collectively? Romans 9–11 is evidence that Paul believes the answer to this question lies in the prophetic tradition of the ingathering of the nations, and the imagery of that tradition is of the nations coming together in harmony and living in peace, "the lion lies down with the lamb." It is a vision of the world redeemed as a whole. To be sure, there will be a judgment, an accounting of sin—that is why Jesus is necessary for the Gentiles. But it is not at all clear that the final judgment for Paul involves each and every person accounting for each misstep. It is the big sins of the world that need to be accounted for. The nations will stand before God as nations, not as individual persons. In modern terms, we may think of these as the sins of oppression, racism, pollution, corporate greed, to name just a few. The Roman Imperial order in which Paul found himself certainly committed the same kinds of sins.

Romans 9–11 is the narrative version of Paul's vision of redemption that he articulates in abstract form in Romans 3:21–26, and it looks something like this: Israel was chosen by God through grace, not because she did anything to earn it. God chooses whomever God chooses to carry out God's purposes, and in that sense, Israel's election was no different, but it was for a special purpose: that she be a light to the nations (see Isa 49:6). That Israel would be a light to the nations meant that Israel would play a critical role in God's plan for redemption. Paul's understanding of himself as the Apostle to the Gentiles is his interpretation of God's commissioning to be a light to the nations. God had promised that all the nations would be blessed through Abraham. That promise had to be fulfilled in order for redemption to be realized, because God always fulfills God's promises.

The problem that emerged, and the reason Paul has critical things to say about Israel in Romans 9–11, is that Israel had failed to live up to her appointed role as the light to the nations. The lack of faith he refers to on Israel's part is not a lack of faith in God but a failure to recognize that God has initiated the process of redemption. Paul's critique of

Israel is not that Torah observance has prevented her from having faith in Christ (as the critical comments of Israel are usually interpreted). The problem is that Israel is not heeding the words of the Torah carefully enough. God declared “the end from the beginning” (Isa 46:10). The death and resurrection of Jesus signaled the start of the divine plan for redemption. It was time for the ingathering of the nations, when the Gentiles would forswear their false gods and turn to the God of Israel. Unfortunately, Israel did not perceive that the time for salvation had come. Unlike Gentile followers of Christ in Rome to whom Paul wrote his letter, Israel did not realize what time it was. And because Israel did not recognize what God was doing, she was not functioning as the light to the nations that Isaiah had prophesied.

Although Israel failed to recognize the significance of Christ and fulfill her role as light to the nations, Paul interprets it as a part of God’s plan for achieving the ingathering of the nations after all. Just as God hardened Pharaoh’s heart in order that God’s name would be known throughout the world, so now God is hardening Israel’s heart in order to protract the timetable for redemption, thus giving more time for the nations to respond to God’s call for redemption through Jesus. Israel’s failure means greater mercy for Gentiles. In the meantime, Paul and others proclaiming the good news of Jesus are the faithful remnant enabling God to carry out God’s plan.

The hardening of the heart is temporary, of course, for God has promised Israel her redemption, and God’s promises are irrevocable (see Rom 11:29). Once the full number of the Gentiles has come in, as Paul tells us, then “all Israel will be saved” (Rom 11:26). Indeed, Paul’s language becomes more and more inclusive as he approaches the culmination of his argument, and it would be hard to deny that Paul’s vision of redemption is expansive, if not universal. It is not only I and other modern scholars interested in interfaith dialogue who have highlighted this language in Romans 11; the church fathers Origen and Abelard and the modern theologian Karl Barth also saw in Paul’s words a vision for universal salvation.⁴

Interestingly, Paul never seems to give up on the language of Jew and Gentile, in spite of this vision. He envisions all the various nations coming together to dwell in the new creation as children of God, but they are included in their variety as different peoples. In other words, Paul does not collapse Jew and Gentile into one generic mass of hu-

manity.⁵ All will be kin; none will be strangers, but the Gentile will not become Jew, and the Jew will not become Gentile. “God created a multiplicity of nations, and a multiplicity of nations God will redeem.”⁶

To be sure, I have not here worked through the nuances of the text to argue my case, but this reading is not far-fetched or dismissive of the complexity of the text; it does, however, require the reader to adopt a new paradigm. There is nothing that forces a reader to understand Paul as saying Israel—that is, Jews—must convert to Christianity to be saved. There is no reason why one must interpret Paul’s statement that “all Israel will be saved” to mean that all Israel will convert, as has traditionally been the case. For that matter, there is no reason to interpret Paul’s description of the “full number of Gentiles” as meaning just some people. It seems to me a plainer reading of the text to say that when Paul says “all” he means all.

I think everyone can agree that Paul’s message was about grace. Why is it necessary to put limits on this grace? Let’s let Paul’s message of grace stand as it is. It seems to me a great start for thinking about religious pluralism. But that is for another book.

Paul Was Not a Christian

*The Original Message of a
Misunderstood Apostle*

Pamela Eisenbaum




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