

- FIVE -

## **"God's Gifts and Call Are Irrevocable"**

The Reception of Romans 11:29  
through the Centuries and  
Christian-Jewish Relations

*Joseph Sievers*



### **Introduction**

#### ***Romans 11:29 in Its Modern and Pauline Contexts***

To study a single verse of Paul's Epistle to the Romans is problematic, to say the least.<sup>1</sup> Taking a statement out of its context, one risks not understanding it or, worse, misunderstanding its intended meaning. In Romans 9–11, Paul is struggling with questions for which he had no immediate or established answer. Accordingly, attempts to interpret these chapters have not been easy, and the areas of scholarly consensus are limited (Räsänen 1988).

If, then, I take only one verse and try to show how it has been interpreted and used from the patristic era to the present, it is in part to keep this essay within reasonable limits. Yet the passage was not chosen arbitrarily. In recent statements and discussions on Christian-Jewish relations, Rom. 11:28b–29 appears to be the most frequently cited biblical text (Hoch and Dupuy 1980, Scripture index). On the other hand, exegetes warn against using chs. 9–11 uncritically for the definition of Christian views of Judaism (Kümmel 1997, 32–33; Sanders 1983, 197; Wasserberg in this volume).

**A** One verse as an object of analysis.

**C** Recent discussions on Christian-Jewish relations.

**J** Christian views of Judaism



It is universally recognized that Romans 9–11 forms a special section of the letter, rarely judged a later insertion (Dodd 1932, 150). Refoulé, while defending the absolute coherence of chs. 9–11 (1987, 239–42), concludes that they are unconnected with the remainder of Romans (1995, 193) or even incompatible with Pauline authorship (1991, 79). On the basis of the lack of scriptural quotations in 11:28–32, Ponsot considers these verses a possible “addition actualisante” (1988, 169 n. 60). Against these, a large majority of scholars considers chs. 9–11 an integral part of the letter, linked thematically and stylistically to the rest of it (Räisänen 1988, 180; Aletti 1991, 150–55, 199–203).

Recently, a renewed emphasis has been placed on the rhetorical model underlying Romans in general (Aletti 1991, 31–36) and Romans 9–11 in particular (Siegert 1985), a concern found already in Melancthon (Schäfer 1963). It is generally recognized that 11:25–32 forms the last subunit of these chapters before the final doxology (11:33–36). Bultmann did not have much use for these verses and declared the mystery of salvation history in 11:25ff. to be a product of speculative fancy (1984, 484). Käsemann, commenting on these same verses, pointedly disagrees, emphasizing the painstakingly careful dialectic by which Paul reaches the end of ch. 11 (1980, 311). Similarly, other exegetes consider 11:25–32 the culmination of chs. 9–11 (Luz 1968, 268; Stuhlmacher 1971, 557).

Within this text segment our verse represents part of the elaboration of the argument, or, in the words of one recent commentator, “[Rom.] 11:29, if not 11:28 and 11:29, constitutes the apostolic summary applicable to all three chapters” (Schatzmann 1987, 18). Kühl had already noted that 11:29 is one of the clearest expressions of Paul’s idea of God (1913, 394). According to K. Barth, chs. 9–10 are to be understood in light of 11:29 (1942, 332). Holtzmann called 11:29 the formula on which Paul’s entire doctrine of justification is built (1926, 663). Others see such a summing up in 11:32, which, however, closely corresponds to 11:29 (Barrett 1957, 224; Stuhlmacher 1971, 558, 567). The centrality of 11:29 appears beyond doubt if, in Räisänen’s words, “it is now generally agreed that [Paul’s] real concern [in chs. 9–11] is the question of the trustworthiness of God as regards his promises to Israel” (1988, 178). Kuss considers one of Paul’s principal questions in chs. 9–11 whether God has “repented of” and withdrawn his gifts and calling (1978, 663), and sees in 11:29 the basic insight of a Jewish-Pauline view of God (1978, 809). Gaston declares that “Romans as a whole can be understood to center on

<sup>A</sup> Romans 9–11 connected with the rest of Romans, despite the views of some scholars.

<sup>A</sup> Rom. 11:25–32 as the culmination of Romans 9–11, despite the views of some scholars.

<sup>A</sup> Rom. 11:29 central in Romans 9–11.

the theme of the faithfulness... of God” (1987, 60; cf. Räisänen 1989, 91–92; Donfried 1989, 771–72).

Despite its importance, Rom. 11:29 has received comparatively little attention. Many commentaries, patristic as well as modern, skip it entirely or merely paraphrase it. None of the Latin church fathers *stricto sensu* (i.e., not counting Ambrosiaster and Pelagius) comments on this part of Romans. Augustine refers to 11:29, mostly in connection with his teaching on grace and predestination (Platz 1938, 197 n. 2). Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on Romans remains to this day among the fullest treatments of our verse (1953, 924–29). Refoulé’s work on 11:25–32 (1984) is the most thorough, though unconvincing, discussion. The scholarly neglect of our verse despite its theological importance was pointed out by Spicq (1960, 210). This neglect has changed, largely however, only in writings concerned with Christian-Jewish relations.

### Purpose and Structure of the Present Essay

An urgent desideratum is the integration of (1) a critical exegesis of Romans 9–11, (2) insights received through the tragic history of this century and through changing relations between Jews and Christians, and (3) theological reflection on the meaning of God’s faithfulness. Although this essay can in no way accomplish such a task, it may at least lay out the data in a somewhat systematic fashion and point out some of the pitfalls and accomplishments of past and present exegesis and theology.

This essay attempts to present not only the current state of scholarship, but to pay close attention to past exegetical and theological evaluations. In fact, theology and exegesis have influenced each other, positively as well as negatively, although at times they seem to be going their separate ways, to the detriment of both. Here it is impossible to enter the debate about theological hermeneutics in general, but Rom. 11:29 seems to be a good test case to investigate what hermeneutical principles have been at work in the past or are currently being applied more or less consciously in using the Scriptures in theological discourse. As to ideas that recur in the literature, I have tried to indicate their earliest appearance in print, but obviously, it is often impossible to be sure of their origin.

The first purpose of this essay is to give an overview of the different interpretations of Rom. 11:29. It will, secondly, attempt to indicate where and how this verse has been used in redefining Christian attitudes vis-à-vis the Jewish people, paying attention to hermeneutical, exegetical, theological, and historical questions.

The essay is structured to proceed from the more technical philological questions (first section) and other exegetical questions (second

<sup>C</sup> Neglect of Rom. 11:29 in commentaries, except in Christian-Jewish discussions.

<sup>I</sup> Interplay of analytical, contextual, and hermeneutical frames.



section) to the theological concerns (third section) found in Rom. 11:29. In the fourth section it will attempt to document how this verse has been used for Christian-Jewish relations and to note theological advances or at least soundings into as yet uncharted waters that may be found in such documents and studies.

### Exegesis of Romans 11:29 in Past and Present

Romans 11:29 consists of nine Greek words: ἀμεταμέλητα γὰρ τὰ χαρίσματα καὶ ἡ κλήσις τοῦ θεοῦ ("For God's gifts and calling are irrevocable"). Textcritically it presents no problems and no significant variants (Spicq 1960, 210 n. 1). Nestle-Aland's 27th edition lists no variants.<sup>2</sup> Translation has never presented major problems, even though the meaning of ἀμεταμέλητα has been interpreted in different ways. The Latin *sine poenitentia enim sunt dona et vocatio Dei* ("For without repentance are God's gifts and calling") is a basically correct though weak translation. It appears unchanged, except for slight differences in spelling, from the Old Latin (Sabatier 1751, 638) until the most recent edition of the Neo-Vulgata.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, by rendering the Greek adjective as a noun, the Latin has obscured the fact that the gifts, and hence the giver, not the beneficiary, are "without repentance." It may have been this ambiguity that led Ambrosiaster (1966, CSEL 81.1.384–87) to conclude from this verse that God's grace is given (in baptism) without requiring prior repentance. In the *Quaestiones Veteris et Novi Testamenti*, now generally considered the work of Ambrosiaster, 11:29 is used in a similar sense: "Finally he remits all sins at once to believers who have converted to him, without prior penitential lamentation. Therefore the Apostle Paul says: God's gifts and calling are without repentance" (Pseudo-Augustinus 1908, CSEL 50.207). One should note, however, that in a fragmentary commentary on Lamentations attributed to Origen there is a reference to baptism in connection with 11:26–29. Baptism is seen as the cause of the removal of "lawlessness," which is essential for salvation (Origen 1983, 3:278.12). Similarly, John Chrysostom, writing at approximately the same time as Ambrosiaster, apparently sees in the irrevocable character of God's gifts and calling a foreshadowing of future baptism.<sup>4</sup> Thus Ambrosiaster might have tried to give a textual basis to an interpretation that was already then current, even in the Greek East.

Ambrosiaster's influence appears in Pelagius. After stating that God does not repent of the promises to Abraham's seed, he adds as an alternative meaning: "Or: those people will be saved without the affliction of

<sup>2</sup> Ancient philology; "without repentance" in Rom. 11:29 referring to beneficiaries or to gifts and giver.

<sup>3</sup> No need of repentance for believers, but God's gifts are conditional.

penance, if they believe" (1926, 92). Here we note not only the misinterpretation of ἀμεταμέλητα but also the allusion to Rom. 11:26a, "and thus all Israel will be saved," and the addition of the condition "If they believe," probably derived from 11:23, "if they do not persist in unbelief" (or perhaps from 10:9).

Ambrosiaster's commentaries were generally attributed to Ambrose of Milan until the sixteenth century.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, for many centuries these commentaries carried all the prestige of that church father. Lanfranc of Bec (1003–1089), archbishop of Canterbury, explains that, to those to whom God gives the gift of faith, he gives it without their prior repentance; but, showing some awareness of the problems of this interpretation, he adds, "Or: those whom he has chosen for eternal life, he has chosen without changing his plan" (PL 150.144). Anselm of Laon (d. 1117) included in his gloss on Rom. 11:29 an interpretation that follows Ambrosiaster: *Remissio peccatorum in baptismo* ("Remission of sins in baptism"). His gloss became part of the frequently reprinted *Biblia Latina cum glossa ordinaria* (1480–1481, 298), a standard reference work for several centuries. Even Zwingli still copied Ambrosiaster's explanation, although he also noted Erasmus's unambiguous and correct translation (*Corpus reformatorum* 99.34; cf. 99.1).

These two elements — the conditional character of the gifts, and the lack of need of repentance — remain staple fare in Latin exegesis until the time of Erasmus, and even beyond. Cornelius a Lapide (1567–1637), a Jesuit, points out this error not only in Ambros[iaster] and Aquinas, but criticizes this interpretation also in an unnamed reformer. He even cites Calvin to the effect that Paul here refers to the election not of individuals but of the whole Jewish people (1617, 161). Erasmus did clarify the meaning of the text by rendering it *Nam dona quidem et vocatio Dei eiusmodi sunt, ut eorum illum penitere non possit* ("For God's gifts and calling are such that he cannot repent of them") (1509, 340). In his *Annotationes*, first published in March 1516, Erasmus explained ἀμεταμέλητα as something that cannot be regretted by the one who gave or promised it, in other words, unregrettable (*impoenitibilia*) (1535, 407; 1994, 311). Luther received an early copy of this work while he was still preparing his 1515–1516 lectures on Romans. He used Erasmus beginning in Romans 9 (Flicker 1908, xlv) and followed him also in 11:29, noting in his scholia that *amitamēlita* means *impenitibilia* and refers not to human repentance but to God's not changing his mind (WA 56:440).

Melanchthon's comments on Rom. 11:29 are somewhat disappointing. In his 1529 commentary he simply offers a rough paraphrase (1848, 481). In later editions (1540 and, quoted below, 1556) he seems to misrepresent 11:29 entirely, because he interprets 11:28–32 to mean, "He exhorts all to repentance, after which he equally offers consolation to all who are doing penance" (1848, 997; cf. 700). Since Paul does not



call for penance in this section, *sine poenitentia* of 11:29, which has, of course, an entirely different meaning in this context, seems to be the only possible basis for Melancthon's interpretation. Brenz did adopt Erasmus's translation, but in his exposition he also returned to the themes of repentance and baptism (1538, 365–66), evoked by Ambrosiaster's misinterpretation. Thus, mistakes can be perpetuated and may give insights into the theological interests of the period.

### The Meaning of ἀμεταμέλητα

Pallis (1920, 132) and Schoeps (1959, 256 n. 1) suggested that ἀμεταμέλητα is a legal term meaning "irrevocable" in the sense of "legally binding." While Spicq agrees with this translation (1960, 219) and brings examples of the juridical use of the term (1960, 213–14; 1978, 72–74), he maintains that God does not consider himself juridically bound, as by the stipulations of a treaty. Luz concurs, emphasizing God's faithfulness (1968, 296). Spicq adds that not just God's fidelity in general, but his unchanging love is meant here (1960, 216). Käsemann disagrees: "The meaning is 'irrevocable' and the reference is not to love, but to the specific forms of grace mentioned in 9:4f." (1980, 315–16). Grammatically at least, Käsemann's criticism is justified, even though Rom. 11:28b ("as regards election [they are] beloved because of the fathers") is linked with 11:29 through a causal conjunction (γὰρ). Zeller further specifies that 11:29 is not based on God's metaphysical immutability but on his free self-determination (1985, 200). It has often been noted that its position at the beginning of the verse gives ἀμεταμέλητα special emphasis (Dunn 1988, 686; Byrne 1996, 356). Wolf seems to have been the first to pay full attention to philological details and to list occurrences of the word in other ancient authors (1741, 232).

Lohfink (1989, 85) observes that ἀμεταμέλητα may be a somewhat polemical allusion to Jer. 38:32 LXX (cf. 31:32 MT), which states, "they did not remain in my covenant, and I did not care (ἡμέλησα) about them." In light of such an allusion and of the position at the beginning of the sentence, ἀμεταμέλητα expresses in the strongest possible terms Paul's conviction of the irrevocable character of God's gifts and calling.

### The "Gifts"

The referent of *charisma* clearly differs in various Pauline passages. Here the term is used less specifically than in 1 Corinthians 12 or Rom. 6:23,

❶ Analytical mistakes reflect hermeneutical frames.

❷ "Irrevocable" meaning legally binding; being about God's faithfulness, unchanging love, or the election of Israel.

❸ God's faithfulness to the election of Israel (Rom. 9:4–5).

Godet nevertheless thinks that the gifts here can be broadly defined in the same way as in other Pauline passages as "moral and intellectual aptitudes given by God to a person in view of the task entrusted to her" (1890, 410). Parry perceptively remarks that *ta charismata* is used "only here of God's gifts outside the Gospel dispensation; its use for the privileges of the Jew (9:4–6) is a remarkable instance of St. Paul's sense of the unity of revelation: the use of the words marks the fact that the privileges of the Jew were the free gifts of God's love, and, as such, could not be forfeited by rejection." He adds, however, that "[the gifts'] operation might be suspended" (1912, 150).

Calvin thought that "gifts and calling" was a hendiadys meaning "the gift of the calling" (*benefici[um] vocationis*) (1540, 259). Although modern commentators frequently cite Calvin's interpretation, no one seems to have noted that Nicholas of Lyra (ca. 1270–1349) had commented on Rom. 11:29, "divine goodness is shown in the gift of the calling" (*in beneficio vocationis: Biblia Sacra* 1617, 152). Calvin may well have been aware of this. Möhler offered a similar explanation: "grace made manifest in the vocation" (1835–1837, 248). But today no one would want to restrict the meaning in this way. In English the term is most frequently translated simply as "gifts," whereas in German literature there are discussions over whether it means *Gnadengeschenke* ("gifts of grace"), *Gnadentaten* ("acts of grace"), or, more broadly, *Gnaden-erweise* ("divine favors") (Schlier 1977, 342). A descriptive definition is "the privileges granted to the people of Israel" (BAGD 878). Most scholars agree that the divine favors of Rom. 9:4–5 are meant (Cornely 1896, 622; Sanday and Headlam 1902, 338; Lyonnet 1962, 139; Murray 1965, 2:101; Michel 1978, 358; Kuss 1978, 817; Wilckens 1980, 258; Cranfield 1981, 257; Osten-Sacken 1982, 60; Refoulé 1984, 167, 208; Grässer 1985, 17; Schatzmann 1987, 18; Stuhlmacher 1989, 156; Ziesler 1989, 287; Baumert 1986, 216). Dunn leaves open the possibility of a broader meaning: "Here the concrete enactments of divine grace no doubt refer to or at least include those listed in 9:4–5" (1988, 686). This is not very far from the explanation given by Bruno the Carthusian (1032–1101): "gifts, i.e., the fulfillment of the promises" (*PL* 153.98B).<sup>6</sup> Schmitt points out that the use of the same term *charisma* here as well as in reference to the gift of grace received by Christians (esp. Rom. 12:6ff.; 1 Cor. 12:1ff.), shows that Jews and Christians live from the same source (1943, 225 n. 807). Luz concretely suggests that one should not exclude the gospel as one of the gifts, because elsewhere *charisma* and "calling" are always used in reference to the Christian community

❶ "Gifts" meaning God-given aptitudes (as in 1 Corinthians 12); or referring to privileges of the Jews, their election (Rom. 9:4–6); or source of life for Jews and Christians (Luz).



(1968, 296 n. 129). Luz may be basically correct, but the meaning of "calling" (κλησις) should not be restricted too narrowly, as we shall see presently.

### The "Calling"

It has been claimed that "the doctrine of vocation as it appears in the NT finds its most articulate expression in Pauline theology" (Scheef 1962, 792). Certainly we have to see the reference to "God's calling" in Rom. 11:29 also in this framework. Weiss noted correctly that it would be arbitrary to limit "the calling" specifically to Israel's missionary vocation (1899, 500). Many commentators, including Zahn (1910, 527) and K. Barth (1942, 332), point out that "calling" and "election" are used here almost synonymously. Wilckens asserts on the basis of 9:24ff. that the "calling" refers to the Christian proclamation (1980, 258).<sup>7</sup> In 9:24–26, however, the verb "to call" (καλέω) is used three times, twice meaning "to name." Wilckens also seems to overlook God's calling Jacob in 9:12 (cf. 9:7). Fitzmyer argues that "that 'call' refers to the initial summons of Abraham (Gen 12:1–2), which became in time the election of Israel as God's 'chosen' people (Deut 7:6–7). But now that call must also include God's summons of Israel by the gospel" (1993, 626).

Most authors, however, do not pronounce themselves on the precise meaning of "the call of God." Käsemann proposes, "It is the power of God's address and claim which takes place with every charisma. The term is interchangeable with charisma as in 1 Cor 7:15ff., for in his gifts the saving will of God comes on the scene as task or mission. God does not give gifts without calling and *vice versa*" (1980, 316). Other authors see the call as the most important or most exalted one of the gifts of grace (Cornely 1896, 622; Jülicher 1908, 300; Bardenhewer 1926, 173; Joachim Jeremias 1977, 202; Michel 1978, 358), or as "the sum and purpose of them all" (Black 1973, 148). Cranfield, however, points out that aspects of the divine calling such as "task," or "commission," do not naturally fall under the description of "gift." He suggests that "by ἡ κλησις here we may understand God's calling of Israel to be His special people to stand in a special relation to Himself and to fulfill a special function in history" (1981, 581). Dunn takes a mediating position, holding that the views of Käsemann, Michel, and Cranfield are not mutually exclusive: "Paul would no doubt have been happy to own all three" (1988, 686).<sup>8</sup>

<sup>A</sup> "Calling" meaning the election of Israel; or of Christians; or of Israel to the gospel; or attached to every gift; or to a task or mission.

### The Form of Romans 11:29

God's faithfulness is a central affirmation of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as well as of extracanonical Jewish and Christian writings (Hofius 1973; Jörg Jeremias 1975, 119). It is expressed in brief, poignant form in Rom. 11:29. The verse as a whole is judged to be in form and content a fixed religious axiom (Kühl 1913, 394; Michel 1978, 357).

Implicitly this fact was acknowledged since early times, when the verse was used outside its Pauline context of the gifts given to Israel. We have already seen the (mis)use made by Ambrosiaster, but even earlier a liturgical fragment seems to point to the broader application of the sentence. It reads in part, "of your irrevocable gift[s] through your only son."<sup>9</sup> Cornely is one of few commentators who warn of simply taking Rom. 11:29 as a universal affirmation (1896, 622). He points to the definite articles as indicators that specific gifts and a specific calling are meant. Thus both the general validity and the special occasion of the statement have to be kept in mind.

### The Beneficiaries of God's Gifts and Calling

Who are the intended beneficiaries of God's gifts and calling? This is in the first instance an exegetical problem, but the solutions are (and have to be) influenced by theological concerns. On the surface, there is a simple answer: the Israel of Rom. 11:25–26 is the natural referent, since "all Israel" is, with the exception of the deliverer (11:26b), the last personal subject before 11:29. Israel in turn comprises or is identical with the "Israelites" of 9:4. As we have already seen, the "gifts" of 11:29 are generally identified with those listed in 9:4–5. Paul there speaks of the beneficiaries as "my kin according to the flesh, who are Israelites" (9:3–4). From the way Paul agonizes about them, they seem identifiable as those Jews who do not believe in Jesus Christ.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, according to Refoulé, the only difficulty in Rom. 11:29 is the question of who is called (1984, 210). This question has infrequently been addressed directly. Rather, it has been treated mostly in conjunction with the interpretation of "all Israel" in 11:26a, because almost all authors agree that the reality called "all Israel" is also the object of God's love (11:28b), and therefore the beneficiary of God's gifts and calling. Augustine, following Origen, considered it a stupid idea to think that the

<sup>A</sup> Rom. 11:29 as a fixed religious axiom about God's faithfulness; or as a specific statement.

<sup>I</sup> Interplay of analytical and hermeneutical frames.

<sup>B</sup> Beneficiaries of God's gifts and calling.



same persons can be enemies of God and beloved by God (*Praed.* 16.33). Modern authors are generally less scandalized by such a polarity of expressions. Refoulé represents a broad consensus when he includes those designated as “enemies” among the “beloved” (1984, 198–99, 206). The consensus, however, does not go much further.

**A** According to Dreyfus, the calling in Rom. 11:29 is that of the patriarchs (1977, 145 n. 26). For him, “calling” and “election” are used almost synonymously in Paul. Thus he also asserts that election can only be individual, even though subsequently its beneficiaries may constitute a community (140). Stated deliberately in extreme terms, his thesis is that for Paul Israel has never been rejected, because Israel as a sociological entity has never been elected (144). Following Dreyfus, Refoulé emphasizes that God’s calling according to Paul is always directed toward individuals (1984, 213; 1991, 75). However, he does not restrict the calling to the patriarchs but, using the terminology of chs. 9–11, develops the following equation: Israelites = God’s children = beloved = elected = called. All the links of this equation for Refoulé, however, represent only “the remnant,” including the remnant that is momentarily hardened (1984, 215).

For Dreyfus, the elect have the function of representing the entire people, and the people in its totality has been and still is the object of God’s special love (1977, 144). For Refoulé, instead, the Jewish people as such is never considered at all in Romans 9–11. According to him, Paul here knows only two kinds of Israel, one elected and the other religious yet hardened (1984, 166–67). Refoulé suspects of eisegesis those who see a positive function of “the remnant” on behalf of the entire people (1984, 149). The prooftext he mentions concerning Sodom and Gomorrah (Rom. 9:29 = Isa. 1:9), however, seems to confirm such a function: if there is a sufficient remnant, as few as ten people, there is hope of salvation also for the others (cf. Gen. 18:26–32).

The question, then, of who is meant by “all Israel” is not as simple as it might appear. Its meaning has been subject to debate since early Judaism and the early church. Recent discussion has been summarized by Refoulé (1984, 36–45; 1991, 76–79; earlier discussion in Caubet Iturbe 1962; cf. Sievers 1997a, 397–400). A schematic overview of the different positions, in addition to his own proposal, is given by Nanos (1996, 256–59).

The overwhelming majority of exegetes takes “all Israel” as a reference to “historical Israel,” that is, the Jewish people (Cornelius a Lapide 1617, 160; Cornely 1896, 616; Sanday and Headlam 1902, 335; Lyonnet in

**A** Beneficiaries being the patriarchs and other individuals (not community); the remnant.  
**A** Beneficiaries being all Israel: historical Israel and the Jewish people; or the remnant as a limited group of elect.

De Lorenzi 1977, 50; Mussner 1979, 57; Walter 1984, 182; Fitzmyer 1993, 623). Dunn notes “a strong consensus that  $\pi\acute{\alpha}\varsigma$   $\text{Ἰσραὴλ}$  must mean Israel as a whole, as a people whose corporate identity and wholeness would not be lost even if in the event there were some (or indeed many) individual exceptions” (1988, 681).

Wright takes a different position: “In this context (Rom 11:26) ‘all Israel’ cannot possibly mean ‘all Jews.’ It is impermissible to argue that ‘Israel’ cannot change its referent within the space of two verses, so that ‘Israel’ in v. 25 must mean the same as ‘Israel’ in v. 26: Paul actually began the whole section (9:6) with just such a programmatic distinction of two ‘Israels’” (1991, 250; cf. Refoulé 1984, 144–83). While he is right that probably Paul did not mean to exclude possible individual exceptions, it would be difficult to demonstrate that Paul used “all Israel” in a more restrictive sense than unqualified “Israel” in the preceding verse and indeed in the same sentence. To restrict the meaning of “all Israel” to only a limited group of the elect thus seems to be uncalled for and not in Paul’s intention. It would make 11:25–32 an anticlimactic diatribe that does not fulfill any of the expectations raised by Paul’s solemn language.

## Theological Questions

It remains amazing how great a variety of approaches has been taken over the centuries, even though the key issue seems to remain that of the beneficiaries of God’s gifts and calling. One central question that haunts Jewish as well as Christian theology is whether or not God can “repent” or “change his mind.” A talmudic dictum recounts that a voice from heaven is heard asking to be freed from the bond of an oath, but without a human response God cannot release himself from his obligation (*b. B. Bat.* 74a). In a similar vein, Buber emphasized during a dialogue session in the dramatic circumstances of January 1933 that for himself and for the Jewish people the covenant had not been canceled. He made this assertion while recounting his experience of visiting the city of Worms, admiring first the perfect artistic greatness of the Romanesque cathedral before moving on to the nearby Jewish cemetery (with the exception of catacombs, the oldest one extant in Europe). The cemetery evokes for Buber death and decay and chaos. Yet he sees it also as a sign of a covenant that has not been canceled, enduring despite everything (Buber and Schmidt 1933, 273; cf. Backhaus 1996, 33–34).

Jörg Jeremias has devoted a study to the idea of divine repentance in the Hebrew Bible. He asks whether such a concept is irreconcilable with Rom. 11:29 and concludes that both the stories of the flood and of Saul

**H** Can God repent? No. Covenant with Israel endures.



that speak of God "repenting" serve to underline that such actions will never be repeated by God (1975, 36; cf. 119).

The irrevocable character of God's gifts and calling asserted by Paul was seen as problematic by most church fathers who addressed this question. In her selective study of patristic material, Judant affirms against Journet (1961, 110) that exegetical and theological evaluations of a given text have to coincide (Judant 1969, 262). Based on this very problematic axiom, she elevates the interpretation of certain fathers to the status of exegetical and theological truths. She asserts that the Jews for whom "the gifts and calling of God are without regret" are those who belong to the church and that this is the interpretation of the entire patristic tradition of the first five centuries (262–63). Schelkle expresses the same problem quite differently. He surmises that early interpreters were almost unable to deal with Rom. 11:29 as it stands (1956, 403).

Luther, in a late polemical pamphlet very different in substance and style from many of his earlier writings including his lectures on Romans (WA 56:440; cf. 438), asserts that he sees no hope for the Jews and, above all, no scriptural basis for any hope for them (WA 53:579–80; cf. Kuss 1978, 813–14). Examples in similar directions could be multiplied, but I will refrain from doing so. It is clear, however, that in past centuries most exegetes and theologians, Catholic as well as Protestant, have found it difficult to consider God's love for the Jewish people a continuing reality.

### Can the Beneficiaries Change?

With regard to Rom. 11:29, this has led to different views concerning the beneficiaries of God's gifts. The development of the tradition is complex and sometimes the view is expressed that the benefits have simply been taken away from the Jewish people and passed on to the church (Judant 1969, 261–62). This claim is certainly not self-evident today, but also in the past it has not been as widespread as is sometimes argued (Judant: 270) or assumed.

This view does not reflect the teaching of Origen or of other patristic authors. Origen offers the earliest complete commentary on Romans, unfortunately preserved only in a less-than-perfect translation by Rufinus.<sup>11</sup> Here he discusses at length Rom. 11:25–29. First of all, he affirms that the blindness that has come over part of Israel is due to the envy of the "angels of the nations" (1998, 700; PG 14.1196A), and is therefore not primarily due to culpability on the part of the Jews. He further admits that God alone and his only-begotten son, and perhaps some of his friends, know who is meant by "all Israel" that is to be saved (1998,

702; PG 14.1197B). Commenting on 11:28–29, Origen does suggest that God's gifts are not dependent on the worthiness of the recipient. In the end, he distinguishes between those Jews who were opposed to Jesus ("enemies") and those who followed him ("beloved"). For the latter only, "God's gifts and calling are irrevocable" (1998, 705; PG 14.1199A–B). Yet, in his (apparently later) commentary on the Song of Songs he refers both expressions of 11:28 ("enemies" and "beloved") to one and the same people Israel (GCS Origen, 8.113.24–28; cf. Cocchini 1986, 85 n. 100; Tyconius 1989, 18, 20). In any event, Origen advocates at most a restriction but not a change of the beneficiaries.

Similarly, Cyril of Alexandria affirms that after the calling of the Gentiles, Israel too will be saved (PG 74.849D). No restriction or change is evident in a fragment attributed to Gennadius of Constantinople (d. 471), who states, "Even though now too they collide with you over the Gospel and you have been instead brought into it, yet because of the Fathers they too have been granted (God's) love. For it is right that somehow all God's gifts remain trustworthy and reliable" (Staab 1984, 401). Similarly, Oecumenius states rather unequivocally, "Even though they themselves because of their disbelief are not beloved, yet thanks to the fathers they are still being loved, and from this they also await salvation. The calling, he says, regards that issued concerning the (Jewish) people" (Staab: 430; cf. xxxvii). John Damascene, after quoting Rom. 11:28–29, comments briefly on these verses: "Since you have been called, those have become more contentious. But even so, God has not canceled their call, but waits for all those of the gentiles who are going to believe to come in, and then those too will come" (PG 95.536). Again there is no trace of supersessionism, even though in this view the effects of the gifts and the calling have been put on hold until the Gentiles have come in.

The first to speak of a transfer of *charismata* from the Jewish people to the Christian community appears to be Justin Martyr, but even though part of his statement is couched in the most general terms, he is referring more specifically to the gift of prophecy and makes no allusion to Rom. 9:4–5 or 11:29: "For with us are, even up to now, prophetic gifts. From this you too must understand that those (gifts) which formerly belonged to your people have been transferred to us" (*Dial.* 82.1). Thus, Justin claims for (Gentile) Christians the status of true Israelites and descendants of Abraham.<sup>12</sup> However, he never alludes to or cites 11:25–32 or the issues concerning Israel raised there.

An anonymous ninth-century commentary concludes its exposition of Rom. 11:28–29, "We have said that on account of Christ's death for our salvation the Jews are enemies of God, yet I do not (want to) fail to mention that some considered that their being enemies is to be referred to the apostle himself, as if the apostle were saying that the Jews

<sup>11</sup> Interplay of analytical and hermeneutical frames.

<sup>12</sup> Can God repent? Yes. Election endures only for those who belong to the church.

<sup>13</sup> Beneficiaries not seen as changed from Israel to the church, except in the views of a few.



CM 151.109–10). Here the Jews do not seem to come into view even as possible beneficiaries of God's gifts and calling; the only question is whose enemies they are, God's or Paul's.

Very different on this point is Abelard's commentary on Romans, written between 1135 and 1137 (Buytaert 1969, xxiv, 37). Although in his commentary on Romans Abelard followed some of the then current conventions, a study of even one verse shows how he grappled with the text and refrained from simply compiling previously known works. He is one of the few authors who does not even take into consideration Ambrosiaster's interpretation of Rom. 11:29. Instead, he addresses precisely the question of whether divine displeasure over any malice of the descendants can cause the revocation of God's promises to the fathers, and answers with an emphatic no: God never regrets to have given something or to have called someone to the faith, because his will is truly entirely unchangeable (CChr. CM 11.270.471–74). Having said this, he explains that where there is talk about God repenting, it is not repentance as normally used in the human sense.

Abelard tries to combine these insights with Paul's statement that "all Israel will be saved." He observes, on the one hand, that God's gifts precede and prepare for God's call: "In God's chosen ones, his gifts precede their call. God in the meantime prepares their will so that when he calls them to himself they give their assent and when he commands (them) they obey (him)" (CChr. CM 11.270.481–83). On the other hand, he recognizes that not all Jews but only a remnant will be among these elect.<sup>13</sup> On the composition of this remnant he offers several hypotheses in connection with Rom. 11:26. Not all individuals but many from all the different tribes of Israel will in the end be converted through the preaching of Enoch and Elijah.<sup>14</sup>

Calvin expresses a view that extends the name Israel to, as he puts it, the whole people of God, including Jews who will in the end accept the faith (*Iudaei ex defectione se ad fidei obedientiam recipient*) (Calvin 1540, 256). Lyonnet criticizes Calvin, especially in his interpretation of Rom. 11:25, for not leaving any room for a future conversion of Israel (Huby 1957, 629–30; Lyonnet 1962, 135–36). Yet, Calvin's statement does not reflect a supersessionist but rather an "integrationist" model (Klappert 1980, 17–18).

### Are Benefits Lost or Put on Hold?

Frequently raised is the question of whether benefits originally bestowed by God may be lost, forever or temporarily. Biblical precedents for an affirmative answer are found especially in the stories of the flood and of Saul but also in other situations where God is said to have revoked a prior decision. Theodoret of Cyrrhus (d. 466) mentions the examples of Saul, who lost his calling, and of Solomon, who lost the peace assured

to him by God. They lost these gifts because of their ungratefulness. A similar threat applies to Gentile Christians, who may be deprived of the grace they received. Thus, Theodoret assumes a conditional character of God's gifts, but suggests that Rom. 11:29 is meant as an exhortation for the Jews (PG 82.181).

Ephraem Syrus (d. 373) emphasizes that conversion and penance are needed in order to benefit from the gifts and calling issued to the patriarchs (1893, 38). Similarly, Pelagius emphasizes the conditional character of God's love: "if they believe, they are beloved." He interprets Rom. 11:29 as follows: "If they believe, (their) sins will not be able to be imputed to them because God does not repent of what he promised to Abraham" (1926, 92). Pelagius's argument follows a similar line as that in Origen's commentary on Romans. A specific dependence of Pelagius on Origen is argued by Smith on the basis of a systematic comparison (1919, 168–69). In a similar vein, John Chrysostom asserts that the virtue of the ancestors is of no use, if their descendants do not believe (PG 60.592). The same line of reasoning is followed by Chrysostom's one-time assistant and frequent opponent Severianus (Staab 1984, 223; Schelkle 1956, 403–4) and by many later patristic and medieval commentators.

Augustin Calmet (1672–1757), a Benedictine and one of the most influential Catholic exegetes of the eighteenth century, discusses at some length the fact and the conditions of the irrevocable character of God's gifts and calling. In contrast with the conditional gifts to Saul and Solomon, he considers the promises to Abraham and his descendants as unconditional and therefore irrevocable. He states, "Without fail He will put his word into practice, if not for all of Israel at least for its better part. He will convert them and call them back to himself; He will give them faith and the grace of his calling" (1730, 219). Thus, even though God's gifts are irrevocable, they become effective only after the conversion. Such a view is very widespread among medieval and more recent exegetes (Migne 1840, 277). Sickenberger compares the status of Israel to that of the prodigal son, not to his older brother. God's love for him will be fully realized when he converts (271). Huby succinctly states a common view: "Israel as a people remains called to enter the reign of God; one day it will enter" (1957, 404).

### Augustine and Predestination

Frequently, predestination has been considered the principal focus of Romans in general and of 8:28–11:36 in particular. Such an interpretation owes its origin ultimately to Augustine. As is well known, his *Confessions* and other works are deeply influenced by his understanding of

□ Benefits and irrevocableness as conditional upon conversion.

□ Predestination of individuals or of Israel as a people through the centuries.



Romans. He gave up on his projected commentary on Romans, begun about 394, in order to devote himself to "easier" tasks (*Retract.* 1.24 = CSEL 36.114). He returned to the exegesis of 7:7–25 and 9:9–29 in his response to questions by Simplicianus, written in 397. This work was decisive for the development of his doctrine of grace, as he himself admitted in one of his last writings.<sup>15</sup> Augustine starts referring to 11:29 in a letter to Paulinus, written between 414 and 416, early in the Pelagian controversy. There he defends his idea of predestination: In his opinion God's gifts and calling are irrevocable for "those who are among the predestined" (*qui pertinent ad numerum praedestinatorum*) (*Epistula* 149.2.21 = CSEL 44.367). Later, in several anti-Pelagian writings, he has recourse to 11:29 in order to prove a double calling, of those who are elect and of those who are not. He does not speak of "double predestination," but affirms that God's grace, gratuitously given, precedes any human response. He explains 11:29 by saying that gifts and calling are "without change, permanently set" (*sine mutatione stabiliter fixa sunt*) (*Praed.* 16.33 = *PL* 44.985).<sup>16</sup> Positive predestination means an assurance of God's faithfulness until the end, even though no one can be sure before death whether he or she is to be numbered among the predestined. If someone does not persevere, this means that he or she has not received such a call from God. In any event, in opposition to Pelagian teachings, he categorically denies the importance of personal merit (*Persev.* 16.41 = *PL* 45.1018).

In the end, Augustine confesses that divine choice remains a mystery, but that it is not up to human beings to impugn God's choice or justice: "From all this it is shown with sufficient clarity that the grace of God, which both begins a person's faith and enables it to persevere unto the end, is not given according to our merits, but is given according to his own most secret and at the same time most righteous, wise and beneficent will; since those whom He predestined He also called, with that calling of which it is said, 'The gifts and calling of God are without repentance'" (*Persev.* 13.33 = *PL* 45.1012).

Concerning predestination, Augustine asserts that he is preaching simply "what every Christian confesses" and what has been taught by Cyprian before him (*Persev.* 13.36 = *PL* 45.1015). But certainly Cyprian had no developed concept of predestination, nor was it universally held by other Christians. Thus, the idea of predestination is invariably and justifiably linked to the name of Augustine. His work has been so influential that until this century Romans 9–11 could be called simply a treatise on predestination (Jülicher 1908, 279; Maier 1929, 5; Caird 1956–1957).

A commentary earlier attributed to the Venerable Bede (673–735), but actually written by Florus of Lyons (790–860) (Spicq 1944, 45) bears the revealing title *Expositio in Epistolas Beati Pauli ex operibus Sancti Augustini collecta*. Regarding Rom. 11:28–29, reference simply is made to Augustine's *De praedestinatione sanctorum*. This type of explicit citation

of sources seems to have been inaugurated by the Venerable Bede (Spicq 1944, 29). Also the commentary by Haymo of Auxerre in his discussion of 11:29 sees vocation, and thus election, as a fruit of predestination (*PL* 117.466; cf. *PL* 134.246).

Several centuries later, Luther too uses predestinarian language in his gloss explaining our verse: "he does not regret, nor does he change, because he has predestined to give and to call" (*non penitet eum nec mutatur, quod predestinavit dare et vocare*) (Flicker 1908, 107). After these and other predestinarian interpretations of Romans 9–11 in general and 11:29 in particular, it comes as a surprise that Calvin, the proponent par excellence of double predestination, does not use predestination language at all in his commentary on this verse. Also, he does not emphasize the individual's fate but God's faithfulness to the election of his people: "He is not, we must remember, dealing now with the private election of any individual, but the common adoption of a whole nation, which to outward appearances might have seemed to have fallen for a time, but which has not been cut off by the roots" (1540, 259; trans. MacKenzie [Calvin 1980, 257]). Calvin reaffirms that God is faithful to his original call, and adds that, according to Paul, there is no contrast between gospel and election, for God calls those whom he has chosen.

Beyond Calvinist circles, predestination remained (as mentioned above) one of the principal keys to reading Romans 9–11 in general and 11:29 in particular. Calmet begins his commentary on Romans with a *Dissertation sur la prédestination, et la réprobation des hommes* (1730, xi–xlvii), in which he asserts, "It is a dogma of Christian religion that from all eternity people are irrevocably either predestined for glory or reprobated and destined to eternal unhappiness. Furthermore, it is a point on which all Catholic theologians are in agreement that the predestination to grace and the calling to faith are absolutely free gifts of God" (1730, xi). He concludes his detailed exposition on 11:29 with a comment on double predestination. Those who are predestined to glory may temporarily fall into sin, but cannot suffer eternal condemnation. Those others who have received *only* the grace of vocation or faith may live for a long time in God's love, but they will not have the gift of perseverance and will not go to heaven (Calmet 1730, 220). Perhaps frequent contact with Jansenist circles in Paris led him to such a position.<sup>17</sup>

Aquinas's commentary on Rom. 11:29 may be counted to this day among the most extensive treatments. In accordance with his usual technique, he carefully contextualizes the verse, trying to determine the structure of Paul's argument. This organic versus atomistic construction of Aquinas's commentaries is one of their most original elements in contrast with their predecessors (Spicq 1944, 215). Aquinas starts from this objection: though once beloved, the Jews have no possibility of future salvation because of their enmity to the gospel (1953, 924). He considers



11:29 the most appropriate response to it, citing in support 1 Sam. 15:29 and Ps. 109:4 LXX (110:4 MT) in order to emphasize God's unfailing fidelity. Aquinas cites further possible objections (925), based on accounts where God is said to be sorry for what he has done or promised (Gen. 6:6; Jer. 18:9–10). He answers this objection by stating that these are anthropopathic expressions that only try to describe the consequences of God's action, not God's inner emotions, just as God's wrath is not an inner sentiment but an outward expression so understood by humans. Aquinas deals with one further objection, the possible loss of the gifts and calling, citing Matt. 25:28 and 22:14. Against this he asserts that the gift here stands for a promise, given in accordance with God's foreknowledge or predestination. Similarly, the call here is equivalent with divine election. Thus, even though Aquinas is indebted to Augustine, he emphasizes much more than does Augustine the permanence of every God-given gift and calling. Aquinas does allow for the possibility that human beings reject God's grace, but there is nothing that could cause God to change his decision (1953, 926).

After this surprisingly thorough exposition, Aquinas turns his attention to the alternative interpretation based on Ambrosiaster's commentary and gives it about equal space. Since Aquinas did not know Greek, he apparently took Ambrosiaster's interpretation as a valid alternative literal reading of the text. He introduced this section by stating, "What is said here may also be understood differently.<sup>18</sup> We may say that God's gifts which are given in baptism and the calling, by which the baptized is being called to grace, exist without repentance on the part of the baptized" (1953, 927). He immediately adds that this is so that no one should despair of the future salvation of the Jews, even though they do not seem to repent of their sin. Aquinas is perhaps the only medieval commentator who links also this (mis)interpretation to the eventual salvation of the Jews.

### Salvation History

A concern with postbiblical Israel's place in salvation history is found in few commentators on Rom. 11:29. Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676) seems to be a lonely and controversial voice in the Baroque period. He belonged to a well-to-do Calvinist family from Bordeaux, possibly of Marrano origin (Popkin 1987, 22–25). In his *Du rappel des Juifs*, published anonymously in 1643, he comments on Romans 11, including v. 29, suggesting that the Jews will be called again by God, after being temporarily rejected. Their renewed call will lead to acceptance of Christ

<sup>18</sup> Postbiblical Israel.

<sup>19</sup> Postbiblical Israel's place in salvation history.

as well as to a return to the Holy Land, under the guidance of a king of France.

Godet proceeds much more cautiously. After having stated that in Romans 11 Paul's intention is not to address the question of a *temporal* reestablishment of the Jewish nation in Palestine, he asks himself, "Will a national restoration of a political nature go along with this general conversion of the people?<sup>19</sup> Will it precede it or follow it?" He avers that such are not legitimate questions for exegesis to try to answer, but it is noteworthy that he dared raise them in a serious exegetical commentary, years before the rise of political Zionism (1890, 411–12).

### Theodicy

Sometimes, a principal element in the interpretation of Romans 9–11 in general and 11:29 in particular is a defense of God's way of acting. Theodore of Mopsuestia categorically asserts that God did not reject the Jews because he repented of the election of the fathers, but they themselves, in the perversity of their minds, became the cause of their separation from God (Staab 1984, 159). Schelkle calls this a rather rationalistic solution of the problem, intended to defend God's immutability (1956, 403).

An element of theodicy is to be found also in Hatto of Vercelli, when at Rom. 11:29 he comments on Saul's rejection (following in some way Theodore of Mopsuestia). He explains that it is not a matter of God's mutability, but that God's decision changes depending on human merits (PL 134.246B; cf. RBMA §3126, §1959).

Hervaeus Burgidolensis (1080–1150) explains that the irrevocable character of God's gifts applies to his unconditional promises (*promissa Dei gratuito facta*). Similarly, God's calling of those whom he chose before the world's creation remains forever valid, and they will bear lasting fruit (PL 181.759A–B).

Cajetan too defends divine immutability by distinguishing between "gifts and calling of God... that proceed from his election" — that is, gifts which God indeed never regrets (*quorum deum nunquam poenitet*) — and those gifts that do not proceed from election. The latter are merely of a temporary or material nature and may be withdrawn by God. He would count God's regret for having created humankind (Gen. 6:6) in this second category (1540, 78b). Even though Cajetan here develops a line of thought that may be traced back to Augustine, he states the double meaning of gifts and calling more radically than his predecessors.

Cornelius a Lapide cites Cajetan (along with Aquinas) for the idea of the two types of calling. He specifies that the proposition of Rom. 11:29 is true of an efficacious and absolute calling, which reaches its desired effect, as in the case of people who are predestined. As an example

<sup>20</sup> Theodicy.



of conditional and ineffective gifts, he cites the fertility of the land of Canaan: "Thus God called the Hebrews and promised them the fertility of the land of Canaan, under the condition: if you implement my law." Because the Jews (here *Judaei* and no longer *Hebraei*) did not fulfill this condition, God did not carry out his promise. But for his part, he had fulfilled his promise, because he was ready to give, and in fact would have given, this fertility, if they had abided by his condition, that is, his law (1617, 161). Thus, Cornelius a Lapide vindicates God's reliability and his justice. A similar line of reasoning is followed by Calmet a century later. He too, after having emphasized God's fidelity, discusses the conditional and unconditional nature of God's gifts. Promises to Saul, to Solomon, and regarding the fertility of the land were conditional and therefore subject to change, whereas those concerning the coming of the Messiah and God's kingship over all "true" Israelites are absolute and never revoked ("sont des promesses absolues, que le Seigneur n'a jamais révoqué" [1730, 220]).

Kühl entitles his comments on Romans 9–11 "Die paulinische Theodizee," a title taken from an earlier monograph by Beyschlag (1913, 310). Kühl concludes this section with a chapter on "Basic Principles of Pauline Theodicy" (403–11). Against this interpretation, Michel argues that Paul's statements in chs. 9–11 may not be understood as timeless truths or as a philosophical theodicy; instead, Paul responds, in accordance with the gospel, to the problem of Israel in salvation history (1978, 364). Kuss warns of an anachronistic interpretation of Paul: it would be imprecise to say that in chs. 9–11 Paul wanted to explain his "doctrine of predestination," his "theodicy," or his "theology of history." On the other hand, chs. 9–11 undoubtedly do offer important contributions concerning these questions, which, however, owe their formulation to later situations (1978, 665).

### God's Fidelity

As already noted, God's fidelity and trustworthiness are often seen as a principal theme of Romans. An emphasis on this aspect of God's nature can be found in some earlier commentaries, at times couched in predestinarian language. Among the medieval authors who pay closest attention to the question of God's abiding fidelity are Abelard and Aquinas. In a similar vein, Erasmus states, "God does not, in our human way, promise a gift or receive into adoption only to repent later and change his mind. He is absolutely immutable, for just as he never errs, neither does he ever need to repent." Erasmus adds, however, the proviso, "He will remember his promise as soon as they cease to reject it" (1984, 68).

□ God's fidelity and human freedom coexist.

Not much later, God's fidelity may be called the principal theme in Brenz's exposition of Romans 11:29. His deliberate attention to our verse is perhaps in direct contrast to Melancthon's neglect of it. Even though Brenz emphasizes several times the necessity of faith, the main thrust of his argument is God's faithfulness to his promises, that is, his gifts and calling (1538, 364.25–30). Brenz expressed this emphasis on God's faithfulness in a parable of a castle into which a king admits us. Even if we of our own will should leave it and surrender to the enemy, the king would not destroy the castle but would continue to admit all those who want to take refuge in it. God has his castle always open because "he does not repent of his gifts and calling" (366.4–13). While Brenz applies 11:29 at first to Jews, he also finds it appropriate for Christians who may lose their baptismal innocence. The temptation is to despair of salvation, even though one does penance. Brenz here uses *poenitentia* deliberately both of humans, who need it, and of God, who never repents (365.33–35). Here seems to be the earliest explicit reference in interpretations of 11:29 to the fact that God's covenants (*pacta*) are irrevocable.

God's fidelity is stressed also by Cornelius a Lapide: "Even though the Jews are still incredulous, God does not revoke what he unconditionally gave or promised." A Lapide counts among these gifts the promises made to the patriarchs and their descendants. He believes that gifts and calling will become effective at the end of the world (1617, 161).

God's fidelity to the Jewish people to the end of the world is emphasized by several little-known nineteenth-century authors (e.g., Reithmayr 1845, 621; Maunoury 1878, 278). Kühl follows a similar line of thought: Israel in its entirety is destined by God for salvation, and all Israel (*Gesamtisrael*) will reach this goal as surely as God's gracious promises are irrevocable (1913, 404).

God's fidelity, however, does not constrain or contradict human freedom. God's plan in history will definitely be accomplished, even though individuals are free to refuse his call (Godet 1890, 411). Lyonnet sees God's fidelity expressed in a special way in Rom. 11:29, because here the object is not promises that might be conditional but gifts that are unconditional (1962, 139).

### Universal Applicability of Romans 11:29

As already noted, Rom. 11:29 is sometimes seen as a universally valid theological axiom. Dunn acknowledges that 11:29 may be applied beyond its specific meaning: "Since the statement is made as a general principle, the gentile (and subsequent) readers would be justified in applying it more broadly to their own calling and foundational gifts of

□ Rom. 11:29 as a universal theological axiom.

□ Rom. 11:29 applied to Gentiles or to the Jewish people.