

Romans 9–11 from a Jewish Perspective on Christian-Jewish Relations

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Romans 9 and the beginning of ch. 10 have often been enlisted to criticize Jews and Judaism, specifically the role of Torah, and supposed Jewish pride. At the same time, ch. 11 has often been used to mitigate some of that criticism, or, at least to offer a positive dimension for reflecting on future expectations for Jews. I suggest that all of these chapters can be understood by Christians to reflect generous attitudes toward Jews and Judaism when viewed from the first-century perspective of the apostle Paul.

In chapter 9, Paul introduces his great concern for his fellow Jews. He sketches, in present tense, the many gifts and callings special to them as Israelites. Then in v. 6, he begins to explain how it is that some of his fellow Jews do not share his perspective on Christ. This language can be read to observe that, through no fault of their own, some Jews are presently being used by God in an unexpected way, that is, to not be persuaded that they should be proclaiming Christ to the nations. Likewise, those Jews who, like Paul, are involved in proclaiming Christ, are also doing this not because they had been more righteous, but simply because God has chosen them from among the rest of the Israelites to do this. The point throughout this argument remains that even those Israelites who are not sharing in this task will eventually be restored to sharing in this activity, according to God's own timetable.

To illustrate this situation, in 9:30-33, Paul introduces the idea that Israelites are to be the heralds of God's good news to the nations, drawing on imagery developed first in Isaiah to this effect (Isa 28:16; and consider the larger context there, and also in Isa 8 about the imminent attack of the Assyrians, and thus, the call to trust, in spite of only being able presently to see the cornerstone, that God will build a tower on it to shelter the Israelites in Jerusalem, rather than trip over that cornerstone while seeking to take up arms to defend against the Assyrians). But some, Paul explains, have stumbled on this course, that is, they are not presently going to the nations with this message of Christ, which it is Israel's special privilege to undertake to do. They are stumbling over whether this news is for the nations

apart from those who respond becoming members of the nation Israel, which they uphold to be what should take place.

Paul maintains the proposition that those from the nations who respond to this message of good news of Christ remain members of the other nations thereafter, joining alongside of Israelites in the worship of the One God of *all* the nations. The non-Israelites cannot become Israelites, because then the proposition that the end of the ages has dawned, when all of the nations will recognize Israel's God as the one and only God, will instead be undermined. If those from the nations become Israelites, which involves proselyte conversion, and in the case of males, circumcision marks the completion of that rite, then God would still be only the God of Israel, of Israelites, and it would not be manifest that the awaited day has arrived. For when it arrives, just as the wolf (those from the nations) will lay down alongside the lamb (those from Israel), so too those from the nations will join alongside of Israelites (Isa 65:25, but see all of chs 65—66; and 2:2-4). The wolves will not become lambs, but will no longer devour them. So too the members of the nations will not become Israelites, but will no longer harm them.

In the balance of ch. 10 and the beginning of ch. 11, Paul continues to explain that, although not all Israelites are presently heralds, that there are heralds, such as Paul. This is not because he has done better deeds, or the others worse ones, but just in some inscrutable way as a result of God's design for how to achieve God's objective of showing mercy to the nations, and thereafter, to show mercy to the rest of the Israelites on the same terms as has been shown to the nations. In 11:11, Paul returns explicitly to the image of some Israelites metaphorically stumbling, that is, not joining in the movement toward the nations with the proclamation of the good news of Christ for all apart from all becoming Israelites. The hypothetical question is whether these ones have stumbled "so as to fall." The denial is swift and certain: "By no means!" Some are stumbling, but this misstep is ironically for the benefit of the nations, and it will not result in a fall, but in them eventually regaining their step, after some from the nations respond positively to those who do herald this message, such as Paul. When these Israelites see Paul's successfully ministry fulfilling the promised privilege of Israelites to bring the nations to the knowledge of God, they will be provoked to want to emulate Paul, that is, to reconsider the claims of the good news of Christ for themselves, and

thus for them to carry to the nations, alongside Paul, their fellow Jew (vv. 13-15). Then the rest of the heralds will find their footing again.

In the next few verses of chapter 11, it becomes plain that Paul's concern in writing this letter is significantly if not primarily concerned to censure presumptuousness among these non-Jews toward those Jews who have not (yet, from Paul's perspective) joined Paul in proclaiming Christ, and the actions that follow from such prideful self-congratulation among these non-Jews. It is not Jewish pride Paul confronts, or the effort to fully observe Torah, or even the failure to have done so, since no one can, as Jews know well, and thus depend upon God's mercy toward repentance, sacrifice, and prayer. What Paul directly confronts is any notion among non-Jewish Christ-followers of having supplanted these presently not-persuaded Israelites, whom they have instead joined as fellow members of the household of God. In Paul's argument, they remain humble members, like a wild olive shoot among the cultivated olives natural to the tree. What they are to learn from these Israelites is just how precarious is their own place in God's favor, and thus, just how important it is to live humbly and righteously, faithful to that which God have generously given to them—including the example of what happens when some of his own, which they are now too, suffer on behalf of the accomplishments of God's sovereign designs. In other words, like Jesus Christ, these Jews are suffering vicariously for the benefit of the nations. How then should their present posture be received?

Paul communicates this message first by way of an allegory of stumbling, which he uses to explain that the current situation is a temporary one that has allowed God to benefit these non-Israelites, but that will be incomparably better when the rest of the Israelites have regained their footing (vv. 11-15; cf. 9:30-33). Paul follows this with an allegory of an olive tree, by which he directly confronts a wild olive branch grafted in among natural branches of the cultivated olive tree, if it should think that it is more favored by God than those natural branches presently suffering damage (vv. 17-24). Paul tells this wild branch (and note, it is but one shoot among many natural branches), that, rather than presumptuousness toward some natural branches presently broken, it should fear all the more what may happen to itself if it should think or behave according to such an attitude, since it is not even natural to the tree. (I write "broken," not "broken off," which is true to the Greek, since it allows for broken as in "dislocated" or "sprained," while broken *off* implies fallen, because Paul denies they have

fallen; rather, he insists, they are stumbling.) Paul goes so far as to state that the wild shoot should be in a state of fear. It should be concerned about the fate of the damaged branches, and recognize the favor it has enjoyed at their expense, for the wild shoot is to learn humbly from the natural branch. It must think and live graciously toward these branches.

Indeed, Paul concludes, the fate of all of these branches, natural and wild, are interrelated in God's design for how to reconcile all of the nations. Since God has shown such great mercy to even wild olive branches (idolaters not persuaded of God), which have indeed been cut off from a tree, and a wild one at that, now God can show mercy to the natural branches (worshippers of God who are not persuaded of Jesus Christ), who were not in need of similar mercy previously (vv. 30-32). And Paul assures these non-Jews that, although some Jews have been alienated from the gospel presently, it is for the sake of this design to offer mercy to the nations, and then, reciprocally, to these Israelites. For these Jews are "beloved for the sake of the fathers," to whom God made promises about the blessings they would enjoy; after all, "the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (vv. 28-29).

Paul makes central to his message the affirmation that "all Israel will be restored" (11:26). This letter is not about challenging Jews for misdirected faith, or for Torah-observance, or even for not believing in Jesus Christ. The basis of Paul's argument is not that Jews are in some way out of Israel or the people of God or the covenant, and need to get back in, as if non-Jews: they remain in, but in a state of discipline for their lack of being persuaded to herald this news to the nations, after which they will be restored. Naturally, this means that they are not persuaded about Jesus as Christ, but that is not the problem Paul is exploring here.

Paul's message is directed instead specifically to non-Jews to help them understand the mysterious ways in which God is working among both Jews and non-Jews, including the present disagreement about the meaning of Christ. This present stage is a part of God's design. Although it might seem that all Israelites would be heralding this news to the nations, Paul argues that, by God's design, only some are now doing so (9:30-33; 11:1-5), but the rest will be restored to joining in and completing this task when the proper time has arrived. Nowhere does Paul call for these non-Jews to evangelize among Jews, or to imagine them to be in need of evangelization. Rather, in ch. 14, he warns his readers to welcome and avoid disputing viewpoints with these Jews, and calls for modification of behavior to accommodate their sensibilities about what is appropriate to eat if claiming to be children of righteous Abraham.

Jews are to be encouraged by such behavior to respect the faith claims of these non-Jews. Indeed, throughout chapters 12 to 15, the major behavior Paul seeks to instill in these non-Jews is a commitment to living respectfully and graciously toward these Jews, and by extension, toward everyone.

Jews today will not agree with Paul's way of seeing the situation, disagreeing with the claims made about Jesus as Christ, and about whether they are in some state of discipline for not heralding the news of Christ to the nations. Jews will generally find such notions offensive, and patronizing at best. These ways of conceptualizing the world are not without implicit when not explicit criticism, they are not value free. For Paul was a Jew, but a Christ-following Jew who was not in agreement on these matters with the majority of his fellow Jews. And the distance is far greater today between Jews and Christ-followers, who are generally not fellow-Jews involved in an in-house disagreement, as was the case for Paul. Today these are two very different religions, and there is much history, including a legacy of harm toward Jews by Christians, often carried out in the name of Christ and Christian conceptualizations of Jews as the enemies of God (see still in the NRSV English translation of 11:28 that "enemies of God" is written, even though "of God" is NOT in the Greek manuscripts, and "enemies" is an adjective, i.e., it should be "enemied," or better, "alienated"; that is, Paul refers to victims, not perpetrators). Yet for Christians to read Romans from the perspective suggested would provide a more positive direction for encouraging attitudes toward and relations with Jews for the future.

Paul sought to provoke respect for the Jewish "brother and sister" who did not agree about Christ when he wrote to non-Jews in Rome in the first century: Would he not similarly challenge non-Jewish Christians, in the development of their theology and policies, in Rome and throughout the world, in the twenty-first? Indeed, it is a great pleasure to observe that this has been the message of the Catholic Church since Vatican II.

Detailed discussion and annotation is available in Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); and Mark D. Nanos, "'Broken Branches': A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry? (Romans 11:11-36)," in *Romans 9–11 at the Interface Between the 'New Perspective on Paul' and Jewish-Christian Dialog*, eds. Ross Wagner and Florian

Wilk (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, forthcoming). Additional materials in support of this reading of Paul are available at www.marknanos.com.

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