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Romans 9-11

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ROMANS 9-11

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell

Paul of Tarsus wrote to the Christian community of Rome about 57-58, in anticipation of his first visit. This letter presents Paul's mature thought on a number of issues pertinent to Christian-Jewish relations. It has made a tremendous impact on western Christianity.

Paul's thesis: both Jews and Gentiles sin and fail to achieve the purpose of human existence and are under divine judgement. But the descent of God's wrath in judgement is offset by the work of Jesus, Messiah and Son. Through his selfgiving in obedient love, Jesus merits divine blessings for all humanity. God's love (*agape*) is revealed through the presence of the Holy Spirit, enabling Christians to attain the destiny of sharing the risen life of Jesus. This new gift of justification moving toward the fullness of salvation does not contradict God's promises to Israel. Themes from the Jewish Scriptures have been the basis for Paul's argument that Abraham is the model of believers and the father of those adopted into God's family through baptism. Romans 9-11 constitute the longest New Testament reflection on the situation of the Jewish people and the relation of Gentile Christians to them. In contrast to 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, the occasion is not so polemical and the issues are discussed at length. Using techniques from Jewish preaching and Scriptural exegesis Paul has built a case from Torah, Prophets and Writings for his analysis of the non-response of many Jews to the Gospel.

Major themes that have been integrated by many generations of Christians into both polemics and genuine dialogue include the seven enduring characteristics of the Jewish people (9:4-5; absence of a verb implies present tense), the mystery of election favoring the unlikely younger sons (Isaac and Jacob) in relation to divine mercy (9:6-29, see 11:30-32), righteousness grounded on faith (9:30-33; see 3:21-4:25). "Christ is the *telos* (end, goal) of the Law (10:4) in relation to Moses and Jonah (10:6-8 in light of Targum Neofiti on Deuteronomy 30:12-13). Isaiah 65:1-2 is interpreted as contrasting the favorable lot of Gentile Christians with "a disobedient and contentious people" (Septuagint) in Rom. 10:19-21. God has not rejected his people (11:1) but a remnant has always remained faithful (10:2-10). The positive response of Gentiles to the Gospel should make Jews jealous (11:11, 14) for all are sanctified by the first fruits and the root of the cultivated olive tree to which Gentiles are grafted (11:16-24). When "the full number of the Gentiles comes in all Israel will be saved;" they are beloved because of the patriarchs, "for the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable" (11:25-29). Ultimately, this is a mystery whose solution is reserved to God (11:33-36).

Origen (185?-254?) offered the first extant commentary on Romans, during his time in Caesarea, after 230; it survives in extensive Greek fragments and in Rufinus' translation into Latin. He believed that Paul addressed Gentile Christians "to demonstrate that salvation is from the Jews, the Law being the foundation on which the truth of Christ is built" (Peter Gorday, *Principles of Patristic Exegesis*, p. 50). Origen considered that Paul intended to pray in Rom. 9:3-4 for the true Israel, composed of those "who see God," Abraham's spiritual progeny. Rom. 9:24 shows that divine mercy has reached an outcast people, the Gentiles, and ultimately to every human heart that is ready to respond" (Gorday, p. 78). Origen uses Rom 11:25 in reference to the

purification of every soul (*Homilies on Joshua* 8:4-5) and to speak of the eventual reconciliation of the Church and the Synagogue (*Homilies on Numbers* 6:4).

As a priest in Antioch (386-397) John Chrysostom (347?-407) preached 32 homilies on Romans. Against Jews who complain that God is unfaithful to them, he showed that Paul argued that God is faithful. The anti-Jewish tone of these homilies is an echo of his eight virulent sermons against the Jews of the city.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) did not complete a commentary on Romans but reflected on Israel's destiny in the *City of God*, letters and sermons. Just as Esau was supplanted by Jacob, so Israel's blindness regarding the Messiah serves Christians. A day will come at the end of time when there will be one people (Sermon 122). In arguing against Pelagius, who emphasized the importance of good works, Augustine castigated the Jews for their supposed adherence to works in contrast to Paul's theology of grace being the foundation for salvation. The Israel which will be saved (Rom 11:25-26) are the predestined elect, Jews and Gentiles, called into unity.

Augustine's influence on the issue of "grace versus works," with its negative view of the Jewish position, came to the fore in the writings of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564). In his commentary of 1515-16 Luther is very negative about the fate of the Jews. In an irenic appeal to the Jews in 1523 ("*Christ was born a Jew*") he commented on Romans 11:25 as a call for their conversion at the end of time, which he hoped would come soon. Later he returned to his previous stance, referring to the obscurity of Romans 11.

Commenting on Isaiah 59:20 (quoted in Rom 11:26), Calvin spoke of the indomitable obstinacy of the Jews and opined that only a remnant would come finally to Christ. The Reformers were heirs of a general anti-Jewish prejudice that interfered with an effort to grapple with Paul's message.

In his epochal commentary on Romans (1919) Karl Barth (1886-1968) did not dwell on "the Jewish question," but reacting to *Kristallnacht* of November 9-10, 1938, he wrote in 1939 that the Church cannot be separated from Israel (referring to Rom 11:17-24); "Christians are guests of Israel, to render it desirous of one day journeying toward the place where it will find its Savior and Messiah. How can we remain indifferent when Jews are persecuted as they are today in Germany? These facts suffice to prove to us that National-Socialism is radically opposed to the Christian faith" (quoted in Journet, p. 334).

In 1944 the Swiss Catholic theologian Charles Journet published a work which lamented the tragedy of the Shoah and presented a response to Léon Bloy's *Salut par les Juifs* (1892). He reviewed the positions of earlier interpreters on Rom 9-11 and presented his own synthesis. "The full number of the Gentiles" in Rom 11:25 refers to nations, not individuals. So "all Israel" in 11:26 designates not all individually but the mass of the people, in contrast to those already converted. Will this return bring history to its consummation? Rather, this re-integration may come within history and influence its development for centuries to come. Then Rom 11:15, "resurrection from the dead" would not be the resurrection for final judgement but an outpouring of divine love comparable to a return of the dead to life. This and other European studies of Rom. 9-11 since the Nazi period have begun to elucidate how Christians may place Paul's

theology of Jews and Judaism in a modern context. Beginning with the meeting at Seelisberg, Switzerland in 1947, groups of Catholics and Protestants have struggled to move beyond the tragic past to an era of understanding between Christians and Jews. When theological discussions take place in the presence of Jewish scholars a new level of mutual understanding may be achieved.

Declarations of many Churches on Christian-Jewish relations draw upon themes of Romans as a foundation for a sensitivity to the place of the Jewish people in the divine plan of salvation. Thus the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on the Church's Relationship to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate* 4) recognizes that Christians are Abraham's children according to faith. They have been grafted onto the good olive tree, drawing sustenance from its root. The privileges of Israel (9:4-5) perdure because "the Jews still remain most dear to God because of their Fathers," for the divine gifts and call are irrevocable. References regarding Jews and Judaism to the New Testament must be studied in context and integrated into a theological synthesis that takes into account the vicissitudes of subsequent history.

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