The Mystery of Israel: A reply to E. Flesseman-van Leer and David W. Hay

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THIS Journal recently contained two articles concerning the present status of the Jewish people in God's plan for human history. Dr. Flesseman claimed for them a special status as an elect nation, in spite of their rejection of Jesus Christ.[1] Dr. Hay virtually denied them any special status whatsoever.[2] I shall try to show that both positions are inadequate, because they fail to do justice to the complexity of Paul's thought in Romans 9–11, which both claim as an authority.

It is important to distinguish the many different arguments which Paul uses in that key passage, as he grapples with the problem raised by Jewish rejection of the Gospel. I shall present these in outline.

1. (*a*) *God's freedom is expressed, not restricted, by His election* (Romans 9:6–16). Election depends neither on works nor on race, but on the prior creative call of God's mercy, which is determined solely by itself; for this reason the failure of the Jews to accept the Gospel does not mean that God's word can have failed. Only a divinely selected group of physical descendants of Abraham are heirs of the promise to Abraham: Isaac, not Ishmael; Jacob, but not Esau (that is, these individuals and their descendants). And not all who are descended from Israel (i.e., the man Jacob) belong to Israel or share as heirs in the promises. Those thus selected owe their existence to God—to His creative word or call or promise. Hence selection is prior to birth or existence and cannot depend on human works after birth; nor on physical descent as such, for this too depends on the prior creative call. This process of divine selection is not unjust, for human will and exertion are irrelevant to it, as has been shown, and so it is not a matter of human rights but of divine mercy, which is determined only by itself.

(*b*) *God's use of unwilling instruments* (9:17–24). God has in the past raised up and hardened unwilling instruments to serve His purposes, for example Pharaoh.[3] He has the right as Creator to create or select some individuals or nations for honourable use and to create and raise up others as ignoble and unwilling instruments in His divine purpose. He endures or

1. *Canadian Journal of Theology*, III (1957), No. 1.
2. *Canadian Journal of Theology*, III (1957), No. 2.
3. There are three reasons for interpreting *skeuē 'orgēs* as "instruments by which God executes wrath" rather than purely "objects of wrath": (i) the phrase appears in Jer. 50:25 where it clearly has this meaning (Denney, *Commentary on Romans* in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, Vol. II, p. 664); (ii) there is no *'eis* as in v. 21; i.e. it is not implied that the vessels are destined to be the object of God's wrath. (Sanday and Headlam, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 261); (iii) these vessels are in fact eventually to be saved, according to Rom. 11:26.

spares the instrument whose sin really fits it for destruction, and He does so for two reasons (as can be seen in the case of Pharaoh):[4] (i) in order to show His wrath and power by mighty acts of judgment[5] and (ii) in order to make known the riches of His glory for those on whom He has mercy. Therefore, Paul implies, God may have a similar purpose in hardening Israel; He may be sparing her and using her as an unwilling instrument, and for the same two reasons. Paul applies the second reason concretely to Israel in Romans 11:11–36: Israel's disobedience has been the means to the Gentiles' acceptance of the Gospel riches.[6]

(*c*) *The saved remnant of Israel* (9:25–9). The group of people whom God now calls into existence as a community is the Christian Church which includes Gentiles and a remnant of Israel. This was predicted by the prophets, who foresaw both an extension of election beyond the original chosen people, and a narrowing of election so that only a remnant of Israel would remain.

Paul's first three arguments try to explain the contemporary situation without reference to any hope for the future salvation of Israel as a whole. In argument (c), for example, Paul thinks of the remnant primarily as a *saved* remnant, inheriting already the full privileges of the chosen people. Argument (d), however, looks to the role of this remnant in the future as a *saving* remnant, representing the whole Jewish people in mediating salvation to the Gentiles.[7]

(*d*) *The saving remnant of Israel* (11:1–7, 16–18). Paul compares the Jewish-Christian remnant with an earlier one in the days of Elijah, which had the function of carrying on Israel's heritage for future generations. The historical analogy here does not involve any stress on the idea of final salvation for the remnant, but on its saving and representative role. This is even more evident in 11:16–18, where the "root"—that is, the historic

4. The interpretation of verses 17–24 as a comparison of the past disobedience of Pharaoh and the present disobedience of Israel is not commonly stressed in commentaries. But it seems to me the most illuminating. In any case, it is not essential to the main points of this essay.

5. The Divine "patience" is often interpreted in terms of Rom. 2:4. On this view, God endures with much patience the vessels of wrath, not because He desires to show His wrath and make known His power, but in spite of so desiring. (cf. Sanday and Headlam, *op. cit.*, p. 261; Denney, *op. cit.*, p. 664; C. H. Dodd, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 158–9; etc.) This view is tenable, but in the context of a comparison between Pharaoh and unconverted Israel, it seems more appropriate to interpret the Divine patience in terms of Ex. 9:15–16, where God spares Pharaoh in order to show His wrath and power.

6. Paul does not apply the first reason to Israel here, as it is not necessary to his argument. 1 Thes. 2:16 does suggest imminent mighty acts of judgment.

7. According to the Old Testament, God's redemption and revelation were to be mediated through Israel. Israel was to be God's prophet to the nations, and Gentiles would go to Jerusalem to learn the ways and laws of the God of Israel, so that through His judgments universal peace might come (Is. 2:1–4). She was also intended to be God's priest for the nations, representing "all the earth" before Him (Ex. 19:5). Through Israel, God would also exercise His kingly power over the nations; in bowing to Israel's sovereignty, they would be submitting to God's (Is. 49:23–6). Through the sufferings of Israel as God's Servant, the Gentiles would be moved to penitence and their sins would be expiated (Is. 53). To Zion, the worship-centre of the world, all nations would come for salvation (Ps. 86:9). In short, salvation for the nations depended on some sort of inclusion within the historic community of Israel.

Israel in so far as it is in Christ—supports the rest of the Church. (Similarly in Eph. 2:20 Paul speaks of the Jewish-Christian apostles and prophets as the "foundation" of the Church.)[8] The Jewish-Christian remnant was now God's saving instrument in history, acting as Israel's representative in mediating salvation to the nations.

2. So far, Paul has attempted to explain Israel's rejection of the Gospel in terms of God's over-all purposes in human history. He also considers it as a human response, or failure to respond. The problem is thrust upon him as he views the uniquely splendid religious heritage of Israel (Rom. 9:1–5). Why have the Jews rather than the Gentiles rejected Jesus Christ, when their spiritual advantages have been incomparable, and He is the fulfilment of their religion?

(*a*) *Divine hardening* (11:7–10). Paul refers to several Old Testament passages in which the prophets, bewildered by the insensitivity of God's people to God's revelation, could understand it only as being somehow caused by God Himself for some inscrutable purpose. Thus Paul shows that such humanly inexplicable sin has been characteristic of Israel in the past, and that it was prophesied for the future, "down to this very day."[9]

(*b*) *Salvation by faith* (10:9–13). The Gospel is open to Jew and Gentile alike, for both can receive salvation through it by simply responding in faith—and only in that way. In this respect, the Jew has no special advantage over the Gentile, for the terms of salvation are identical for each. This point is so constantly and so clearly stated throughout Paul's writings that it needs no further elaboration here.

(*c*) *The Law a special obstacle* (9:30–10:8). The Law, which was God's special revelation to the Jews, has provided a special obstacle for them in contrast with the Gentiles, as they respond to the Gospel. (i) It made the Cross a stumbling-stone (for according to the Law, Jesus was thereby accursed) and (ii) it led the Jews to seek status before God by works, rather than by accepting God's gift of salvation offered in Christ to be received in faith.

3. In the arguments outlined so far, Paul has tried to explain a situation in which only a small part of Israel has inherited the promises of God fulfilled in Christ, and in which the Gentiles, in growing numbers, have also received this inheritance. Already, in Paul's emphasis on the saved and saving remnant of Israel, there has been an admission of the principle that the promises to Israel as a nation have been rightly or even necessarily received by at least a representative group within Israel. Paul has, of course, maintained the equality of status of Jews and Gentiles before God in obtaining a salvation dependent on God's creative mercy and human faith-

8. Cf. Dom. Gregory Dix, *Jew and Greek*, pp. 59–60; and Erik Peterson, *Le Mystère des Juifs et des Gentils dans l'Eglise, a Commentary on Romans 9–11* (Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, no date), p. 9.

9. Cf. Mk. 4:12 and Acts 28:26–7 for the use of Is. 6:9–10, which Dodd describes as a commonly-used testimonium of the primitive Church (Dodd, *According to the Scriptures*, p. 38). In Mk. 6:52 and 8:17–18 the ideas in Is. 6:9–10 are explicitly linked with the idea of hardening, as in Rom. 11:7–8.

response: but he has qualified this by pointing out the special status and role of remnant-Israel in God's plan and purpose. If arguments 1. (*a*) and 2. (*b*) were completely adequate, Paul would have no special problem concerning Israel as a whole, and would surely present no other arguments. But in Rom. 11:11ff. he goes on to describe non-Christian Israel's special role and status in the divine economy.

(*a*) *Jewish loss means Gentile gain* (Rom. 11:11–2). Israel's rejection of the Gospel has made possible the successful mission to the Gentiles. Thus her loss is the means to their gain; her disobedience, to their acceptance. Paul saw that the prompt Jewish repudiation of the Gospel had in fact made possible its early availability to the Gentiles in an acceptable form, neither nationalistic nor legalistic.[10]

(*b*) *Eventually all Israel shall be saved* (11:11–36). Israel's stumbling has not been to a final and irremediable "fall," but to an eventual salvation.[11] Paul suggests three bases for this hope:

(i) *Gentile Salvation and Jewish Jealousy* (11:11, 14; 10:19). When the full number of the Gentiles come in, Israel will be so aroused to jealousy that she will repent and be saved. This indeed is one motive for Paul's missionary work among the Gentiles.

(ii) *The "naturalness" of Israel's return* (11:16–25). How natural it will be for the Jewish people to be "grafted" in to an olive tree whose "root" is a Jewish-Christian group. Paul's argument assumes, of course, that most of Israel is not now part of the tree, the elect community. But his point is an *a fortiori* one—if the Gentiles, "stranger to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world" (Eph. 2:12) can enter into the Christian community, how much more natural it is that eventually the Jews will enter also!

Elsewhere in his writings (e.g. 2 Cor. 1:20; Gal. 3:15–18), Paul holds that the chosen people had been narrowed down to one representative man, Jesus Christ, who fulfilled all the promises, both continuing and transforming the religious heritage of Israel;[12] there is but one way of entering into this new community—by faith in Jesus Christ—and this way is open to all; He is the foundation of the community. But here in Romans, Paul also insists on the importance of the Jewish-Christian remnant as the "root" of a tree to which it is more "natural" for Jews than Gentiles to be grafted.

(iii) *God's commitment to Israel* (11:26–9). Israel's failure to respond to God does not simply mean the end of her special relation to Him. However much Paul emphasizes the new situation created for Israel by the coming of Jesus Christ, he does not simply equate her failure with the abolition of all that her election had involved. We must examine two dog-

10. Cf. Dix, *op. cit.*, 6. 53; and Acts 18:6.

11. The word "fall" in the AV translation of Rom. 11:11(*b*) and 11:12 is misleading. RSV "trespass" is better.

12. Each of the privileges listed by Paul in Rom. 9:4–5 was thought by him to be continued in a transformed way by Christ: sonship (Gal. 3:23–9); glory (2 Cor. 3:12–4:6); covenants (1 Cor. 11:25); giving of the law (Rom. 10:4; 13:10); worship (1 Cor. 5:7; 11:23–5; Rom. 12:1); patriarchs (Rom. 4).

matic statements of faith in chapter 11, which are based on major themes of the Old Testament.

"As regards election they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers."[13] God's love for Israel as a people was sometimes expressed in terms of His love for the patriarchs, for Israel was identified with them or included in them.[14] God's choice or election of Israel was therefore sometimes explained in terms of His love for the fathers: "He loved your fathers and chose their descendants" (Deut. 4:37. RSV). For God loved the people as a whole, and as a result of this, all the individuals in the great corporate personality of Israel.[15] However much Paul opposes the notion that Israel could earn salvation through works or race, he could not merely discard the Old Testament doctrine of God's beloved people. The nation was upheld by "the immutableness of the sovereign love with which He made it."[16]

"For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance" (Rom. 11:29). The maintenance—or at least the ultimate fulfilment—of the privileges of Israel listed by Paul in 9:4–5 is assured, because God has *promised* never to reject His people in any final way:

> "If this fixed order departs
> from before me," says the Lord,
> "then shall the descendants of Israel cease
> from being a nation before me for ever."[17]

It is significant that this declaration immediately follows the famous passage in Jeremiah where God declares His intention to set up a new covenant by which Israel will be able to cast off her sin and faithlessness and return to be His holy people. Similarly, Rom. 11:27 probably means, "My side of the covenant will be fulfilled when I take away their sins."[18] That is, God's promise and His fidelity provide an assurance that He will somehow win back His people, helping them to fulfil the moral conditions required for fellowship with Him. Of course, God is not legally bound by His covenant promises, for Israel has broken her side of the covenant. His *hesed* or covenant-love, becomes like *hen*, a mercy which rests on no obligation whatsoever.[19] Yet His promises are in a sense unconditional; He does not repudiate Israel's election when Israel breaks the covenant.[20] He will punish her, more severely than others because of her greater privilege and respon-

13. Rom. 11:28, RSV. If, with Hay (*op. cit.*, p. 99) we identify these "fathers" with the Jewish-Christians, this does not destroy the claim that "Jewishness" still involves a special relation to election.

14. Cf. Deut. 7:7–8; 23:5; Hos. 2:14; Ezek. 16:1–14.

15. Cf. C. Montefiore: "It is because the community is known to, and loved by, God, that God knows and loves each individual who composes it" (in J. Jocz, *The Jewish People and Jesus Christ*, p. 309). Cf. G. Quell and E. Stauffer, under "Love," *Bible Key Words*, translated and edited by J. R. Coates, p. 16.

16. Denney, *op. cit.*, p. 676.

17. Jer. 31:36, RSV.

18. Cf. Sanday and Headlam, *op. cit.*, p. 337. Rom. 11:26–7 is a conflation of Is. 59:20 and Is. 27:9 or perhaps Jer. 31:33.

19. On *hesed* and *hen* see N. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, pp. 127–30.

20. Cf. H. H. Rowley, *The Biblical Doctrine of Election*, p. 52.

sibility (cf. Amos. 3:2), but this is to turn her towards repentance. If God appears to have abandoned Israel, this must be merely a temporary measure. For the gifts and calling of God are beyond repentance.

As Bright has said, "Israel's God is the Lord of history; . . . history moves towards his victory, the triumphant establishment of his rule over his people. True, he called Israel to be the people of his rule, and Israel had egregiously failed and fallen under condemnation. But that fact could not in prophetic theology cancel out the victory of God, for that would be to allow that the failure of man is also the failure of God."[21]

Did Paul really imply all this background of Old Testament thought in his brief statements about beloved Israel and God's irrevocable call? If he did not, or if he interpreted God's commitment to Israel solely in terms of its being fulfilled in Jesus Christ and the "remnant," then it is difficult to understand either his problem or his additional solution in Rom. 9–11; Israel's rejection would raise no special theological problem, and there would be no special basis of hope for her eventual salvation.

Conclusions

1. Dr. Hay is correct in stressing the drastic changes which the coming of Jesus Christ makes for the Jewish people: (1) Their salvation now depends on their response to the Gospel and their entrance into the Christian community. They must now *become* members of the true Israel, the elect, the saved and saving fellowship. Outside it, they are not in actuality the elect, but the rejected. (2) By faith in Christ they can enter a new relation with God different from, and superior to, that which they have had as Jews.

2. But Dr. Flesseman is also correct in stressing the fact (which Dr. Hay reluctantly admits)[22] that there is still some relation between God and the Jewish people as such. She unwisely defines this relation in such a way as to minimize the difference between the Christian fellowship and the Jewish people, as if the latter were still the "elect" in the same way as before. But the relation, *pace* Dr. Hay, is not left utterly undefined by Paul: (1) The Christian Church has been built on a saved and saving remnant of Jews who became Christians. These Jews in part fulfil the promise of God to the Jewish people and His plan for them. And there is a special "naturalness" in Israel's finally entering the Christian community (though the Law also provides a special obstacle). (2) The commitment of God to the people of Israel is not rendered utterly null and void merely by the failure of Israel to respond. This Old Testament conviction is accepted by Paul. In the end, God will win over His people. (3) The contemporary Christian church should realize in relation to the Jewish people that they will eventually respond positively when they see unmistakably that the Christian community has in fact inherited all the spiritual blessing promised in the scriptures, and

21. John Bright, *The Kingdom of God*, p. 87.
22. *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

more. This warns us not to expect an imminent mass conversion of the Jews, but hardly—as Dr. Flesseman suggests[23]—rules out attempts to convert Jews in the meantime.

3. This continued special status of the Jewish people in the divine plan for human history raises two problems, both mentioned by Dr. Hay: (1) Does this continued special status (whether we call it election or not) possess a *character indelibilis*? The answer is surely "No," if having such a character means an impairing of either divine freedom or human freedom. Dr. Hay emphasizes divine freedom when he says, "That 'the gifts and calling of God are without repentance' . . . guarantees nothing but God's faithfulness. It is a statement about Him rather than about the Jews" (p. 99). That is Paul's argument in Rom. 9:6–16 (but not in 11:11ff). And Dr. Hay emphasizes human freedom when he says, of the Jews, "They could remain permanently in unbelief" (*ibid.*). That is Paul's assumption in 11:23. On the other hand, it is not true to Paul's thought so to emphasize divine and human freedom that no room is left for any special status. All three elements appear in chapters 9–11. It is perhaps impossible to reconcile them completely; but it is wrong to simplify the problem by omitting or denying one of them—as Dr. Hay does with special status, and Dr. Flesseman with divine freedom.

(2) Paul bases his hope that all Israel will be saved on the conviction that Israel has a continued special status. What place have Paul's special hope and conviction concerning Israel in Christian thought?

Paul's description of this as a "mystery" provides a clue. It means, on the one hand, that he claims the authority of a special revelation, a religious intuition into God's plan as revealed in Christ.[24] It does not perhaps have sufficient relevance in personal salvation to warrant inclusion as an article of faith—as was another "mystery," the resurrection of the body. And it cannot be made a dogma, as distinct from a hope, unless universal salvation be made a dogma, for it is open to similar objections. But perhaps the Church *has* erred, as Dr. Flesseman suggests, in not granting sufficient attention or authority to this "mystery."

As a "mystery," on the other hand, it is something which by nature is hidden, and which, though revealed, is not revealed in such a way that we can penetrate its full depths. In Paul's view of history there are two surd factors, two elements which do not fit into a neat monistic "philosophy of history." One is God, whom we still see only through a glass darkly. The other is the real possibility of the continuance of sin, thwarting even the purposes of God. God has the power and the will to save the Israelites, but only "if they do not persist in their unbelief" (11:23, RSV).

23. *Op. cit.*, p. 13.
24. Cf. Dodd, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 182.

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