

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

that, as a narrative of the Divine dealing with men, they have fared any better at the hand of Professor Sayce than they have at the hands of any other critics. He has come into the field to show the fallacy of the conclusions of the critics, and has ended by adopting a position not dissimilar from theirs. The Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge have, like the King of Moab of old, summoned their Balaam from the literature of the East to curse the critics, and lo! he has blessed them altogether.

ALEXANDER MACALISTER.

ST. PAUL'S CONCEPTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

XVII. THE ELECTION OF ISRAEL.

WE have now to consider the Pauline apologetic in relation to the last of the three topics on which it bears, *the Election of Israel*. The materials available for our purpose are contained in the ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters of the Epistle to the Romans.

The subject is very abruptly introduced. There appears to be no connection between the close of chapter eighth and the beginning of chapter ninth. And there is indeed no *logical* connection, but there is a very close *emotional* one. The subject is suggested to the writer's mind on the principle of contrast. He has been expatiating with impassioned eloquence on the peace-giving faith, and inspiring hope of believers in Christ. But when he has ended his song of triumph and paused for a moment to recover breath, the bitter reflection suddenly suggests itself—in all this peace and joy of faith and hope most of my countrymen have no share. It is a reflection most painful to his feelings as a Jew who loves his race, and takes pride in their national prerogatives and privileges. But the fact that

Israel is prevalently unbelieving is more than a source of personal grief to Paul the Jew; it is a serious difficulty for him to grapple with as the apostle of the Gentiles, and the advocate of a universal gospel independent of Judaism, and as one whose mission among the Gentiles had been greatly successful. For did not the unbelief of Israel, taken along with the extensive reception of the gospel by Gentiles, signify the cancelling of Israel's election, the rejection of the Jews and the substitution of the Gentiles in their place as the objects of Divine favour? Or, if it did not signify this, was it not an argument against his gospel to this effect: the Pauline Gospel cannot be true, for it is rejected by the mass of the elect people? Thus does the apostle appear placed in a dilemma, on neither horn of which he will care to be impaled. How does he get out of the dilemma?

He deals with the hard problem in two ways, in both of which he successfully escapes the dreaded inference that his gospel is illegitimate. First he reckons with the facts on the assumption that they signify an absolute final cancelling of Israel's election, striving to show that even in that case there is no presumption against his gospel. The argument of his opponents being: if you are right in your view of Christianity, then God has rejected His chosen people; but such a rejection is impossible, therefore you are wrong; his reply in the first instance is: such a rejection is *not* impossible. This is the line of defence pursued in the ninth and tenth chapters. But the apostle is not content with this line of defence. He proceeds next to consider more carefully whether the facts do necessarily amount to a final absolute rejection of Israel, and comes to the conclusion that they do not, so of course again evading the unwelcome inference of the falsity of his Gentile gospel. This is the train of thought in the eleventh chapter. This two-sided apologetic argument we have now to consider in detail.

I. The argument as adjusted to the hypothesis of a cancelled election.

The apostle guards against unfavourable inferences from this construction of the facts by three distinct arguments. The first of these is, that there was always an election within the election; the second, that in election God is sovereign and not under law to the elect; the third, that if Israel was rejected it was her own fault: she had brought it upon herself by a habit of disobedience and unbelief for which she had had a bad reputation all through her history.

1. *There was always an election within the election.* This is the gist of ix. 6-9. What the apostle says here is in substance this: It is certainly a serious thing to speak of Israel's election as cancelled, for that would seem to amount to saying that God's word declaring Israel to be His peculiar treasure had been made void. But we must distinguish between election and election. There is an election that is cancellable, and an election that cannot be cancelled, an outer circle that may be effaced, and an inner circle that is ineffaceable. There always have been these two elections, the outer and the inner, an Israel of God within the Israel after the flesh, a seed of Jacob the child of promise within the seed of Abraham. The two elements can be traced all along the course of Israel's history; they are very recognisable now. There is an Israel after the flesh, and an Israel after the promise at this hour. And it is of the former only that cancelling of election can be predicated. The election within the election stands, for this inner circle is to be found within the Christian Church. It cannot therefore be said now that the word of God calling Israel to be a chosen race has been rendered void, except in a sense in which the same thing could have been said at any time in Israel's history, *e.g.* in the time of Elijah.

2. *In election God is sovereign.* This is the import of ix.

10-24. The leading thought in this section is that in electing acts God is free; that as no people has a claim to be elected, so no people has a claim to the continuance of its election; that what God sovereignly begins He may sovereignly end. There may be good reasons why God should not end what He has solemnly begun, but they are to be found in God not in man. The apostle, having in view to beat down Jewish pride, which thought that the elect race had a claim to a monopoly and to the perpetual enjoyment of divine favour, asserts the sovereignty of God in the business of election in a very absolute and peremptory manner. Going back to the commencement of Israel's history, he shows how conspicuously God's sovereignty asserted itself even there, inasmuch as it determined which of the two sons about to be borne by Rebecca was to be the heir of the promise before the children were born, therefore before anything in the conduct of the two sons had emerged to make the election turn on personal merit. The elder, it was announced beforehand, was to serve the younger, so excluding not merely personal character, but civil law and custom as a ground of choice. This might seem arbitrary and even unrighteous, but the apostle is not careful to repel such a charge. The point he insists on is the matter of fact; arbitrary or not, so stands the history. And he goes on to show that it was not a solitary instance of sovereign action, pointing out that God claimed the right of so acting in all cases in the words: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion," then citing the case of Pharaoh in proof that God acts on that principle not merely to the positive effect of sovereignly exercising mercy, but also to the negative effect of hardening unto destruction. An extreme position which naturally suggests the objection: what room under this doctrine for the imputation of guilt, for who hath resisted His will? Had

this difficulty been stated by a devout enquirer, anxious to maintain an equilibrium between Divine sovereignty and human responsibility, the apostle would doubtless have taken pains to soften, modify, and adjust his statements. Of this they certainly stand in need, for the assertion that God hardens men to their destruction is unquestionably capable of most mischievous perversion to the detriment of both piety and morality. Had St. Paul been in the mood to pursue an apologetic line of thought with a view to reconciling Divine sovereignty with Divine love on the one hand, and with human responsibility on the other, he could easily have found materials for the purpose even in the history of God's dealings with the king of Egypt. For what was the natural tendency of the signs and wonders wrought in the land of Ham? Surely to soften Pharaoh's heart to the effect of letting Israel go. God hardened Pharaoh's heart by means fitted and intended to have the opposite effect. And the fact is so in all cases. The means of hardening are ever means naturally fitted to soften and win. The apostle knew this as well as we, but he was not in the mood to indulge in such a strain of explanatory, conciliatory remark. He was dealing with proud men who thought the election of their fathers gave them a prescriptive right to Divine favour. Therefore instead of softening down hard statements he goes on to make harder statements still; representing God as a potter, and men as clay, out of which God can make such vessels as He pleases, one to be a vessel of mercy, another to be a vessel of destruction, to be dashed to pieces at the maker's will. As against human arrogance it is a legitimate representation, but as an exact, complete statement of the relation between God and man it cannot of course be regarded. So viewed, it would be simple fatalism.

3. How far the apostle was from intending to teach fatalism appears from his third argument under the first

alternative, the object of which is to *throw the blame of Israel's rejection on herself*. This argument forms the leading contents of chapter x. He here brings against Israel the grave charge of not submitting to the righteousness of God. Fully recognising the good side of the national character, zeal for righteousness as popularly conceived, he nevertheless holds his countrymen responsible for the great miscarriage of their election, finding in their passion for righteousness not only a lack of knowledge or spiritual insight, for which they might be pitied, but a culpable spirit of self-will. He ascribes to them the ambition to establish a righteousness which they can regard as their own achievement. They are too proud to be debtors to God. They desire to be able to say: "God, I thank Thee, that I am not as other men." Hence the Gospel of pardon to the sinful has no attractions for them. Its very simplicity is an offence to their pride. They are unbelievers, not because they have not heard the gospel, or have not understood its meaning. They have heard enough, and they have understood too well. And the present unbelief is but the reproduction of a standing feature in the character of the race in all its generations, which provoked the remonstrances of God's messengers from Moses to Isaiah. Moses said: "I will provoke you to jealousy by a no-nation, by an unwise nation will I anger you," thereby hinting a threat of degradation from the position of the elect race. Isaiah still more outspokenly revealed such a Divine purpose of disinheritation by signaling on the one hand the honour God had received among the outside peoples, and on the other hand the indifference and even hostility with which His messages by the prophets had been treated by the chosen nation. The drift of the citations is: unbelief and disobedience have been features of the Jewish national character all through her history, provoking God to repent of His choice, and to threaten disinheritation. The same

features reappear in the living generation, in exaggerated form, in reference to the mission of Jesus; till now at length the Divine patience is all but exhausted, and the oft-repeated threat is on the point of becoming an accomplished fact.

II. But at this point the thought of the apostle takes a new turn. He recoils from the idea of an absolute and final disinheritance; nay, as we shall see, he finds even in the prophetic oracles which threaten such a disaster a bit of solid ground whereon patriotic hope can plant its foot. Looked at broadly, the relative oracles do seem to point at complete rejection; therefore the question inevitably arises whether that is really what was intended and what is now actually happening. The apostle does not shirk the question. He plainly asks it, and as plainly answers it, and that in the negative.

“I say, then, hath God thrust away His people? God forbid!” He speaks vehemently, and he has a good right. For he too is an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. And he speaks confidently, again with good right. For he remembers his own history, that of one who also had been unbelieving and disobedient, and he cannot but hope that God who had mercy on him, has grace in store for his countrymen, notwithstanding all their provocations. Moved at once by patriotism, and by the hope inspired by his own conversion, he sets himself to put as encouraging a construction on the facts as possible. In the first place he lays stress on the mere fact of the election. “God hath not thrust away His people whom He foreknew.”¹ He has indeed already combated the idea that the act of election gives the elected a claim to perpetual enjoyment of the privilege. But quite compatibly with that position, he holds that an act of election may bring God under obligation to Himself, that an act of that kind once

¹ xi. 2.

solemnly performed cannot lightly be recalled without loss of dignity. It is therefore, in his view, a strong point in favour of any people that God hath foreknown or chosen it to any signal position in history. The dignity of the Divine character is on the side of continuance. From this point of view it may be affirmed that "the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance."¹ Next the apostle extracts comfort from the consideration that now, as in Elijah's time, there are doubtless more faithful ones than at first appears; that the remnant, the inner circle of the elect, is not by any means so inconsiderable a body as in hours of depression one is apt to suppose. When Elijah thought he stood alone in a faithless, apostate time, there were 7,000 men who had not bowed the knee to Baal,—a small number compared with the whole nation, but a great number compared with one man. So now the sad-hearted apostle would bear in mind that there were not a few believing Israelites in all the churches. "So then also in the present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace."²

Still the sad fact remained that the great majority of the Jewish nation were unbelievers. What is to be said of them? In the first place, it must be sorrowfully acknowledged that they have been blinded by inveterate prejudice, in accordance with Scripture representations.³ The picture of a blind, decrepit old man, bowed down with age and infirmity, suggested by the concluding words of the quotation from the Psalter, is a very pathetic representation of a people in a state of religious senility. When a people gets to this senile condition in religion, its inevitable fate, one would say, is to stumble and fall; for blind, feeble old age can neither see obstacles in the way, nor recover its balance when it strikes its foot against a stone.

What then? Is Israel's doom to stumble and fall, and die, and disappear from the face of the earth, like an aged

¹ xi. 29.

² xi. 5.

³ xi. 7-10.

man when the powers of physical nature fail? That is the question the apostle has to face. "I say then, did they stumble (over the Christian faith) that they might fall (finally and irretrievably)?"¹ Not this either can he believe. He repels the idea with another energetic *μη γένοιτο*. But is it that he simply *will* not believe it? or has he any shadow of a reason for taking up this position? It must be confessed that the prospect of discovering such a reason is at first sight not encouraging; for what can befall blind, tottering old age but death and burial? It is easy to see that the apostle is conscious of having a stiff piece of argument on hand. His "I say then's," and his "God forbids" are the sure index of laborious effort. But a patriotic heart can discern a "bit of blue sky" where other eyes can see nothing but dark clouds. The apostle finds the bit of blue sky even in the threatening words quoted from the song of Moses: "I will provoke you to jealousy by them that are no people"; and backs up his *μη γένοιτο* by the remark: "but by their fall salvation to the Gentiles, unto the provoking of jealousy in them."² Paraphrased, his reasoning is to this effect: The facts do not mean final, irretrievable rejection, the construction I, taking encouragement from the words of Moses, put on the facts is this: that which has been the occasion of stumbling to unbelieving Jews, Christ crucified, has brought salvation to the Gentiles; and salvation has come to the Gentiles to make unbelieving Jews feel envious at the loss of privileges that have fallen to the lot of others, and desirous to recover them. It is an ingenious turn of thought; but, for St. Paul, it is more than that—a deep conviction firmly rooted in his mind, and influencing his whole conduct. For even when he is busy evangelizing the Gentiles, he has his countrymen in view, hoping to reach them in a round-about way through the conversion of heathens to the Christian faith. When we see him turning

¹ *Rom.* xi. 11.

² *Ibid.*

his back on the Jewish synagogue, and addressing himself to Pagans, we might think he is abandoning the Jews to their fate in a huff, and that he is not going to trouble himself any more about them. But it is not so. He is only changing his tactics. Having failed to win Jews to Christ by direct preaching of the gospel, he is trying to *spite* them into faith. "Inasmuch as I am an apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office, if by any means I may provoke to emulation my flesh, and may save some of them."¹ That is, I do my utmost to convert the non-elect peoples that the elect people may be made jealous, and at length accept the grace of God in the gospel it has hitherto despised. Such is the apostle's *modus operandi*, and such his motive; and he expects his Gentile readers to sympathise with him both in method and in motive. They will lose nothing, he assures them, by such generous conduct. If they have benefited by the fall of the Jews, they will benefit still more by their rising again. The ultimate union of Jew and Gentile in one commonwealth of religious faith will be as life from the dead to a world long cursed with alienations between man and man, and race and race.

The foregoing thought, that the rejection of the Jews in favour of the Gentiles was not an absolute rejection, but only a new way of working beneficially on the Jewish mind, possesses genuine biographic interest as the utterance of a noble man animated by the invincible optimism of Christian patriotism. But it is also of value as throwing light upon St. Paul's way of thinking on the subject of *election*. These chapters of the Epistle to the Romans have been, by scholastic theology, put to uses for which they were never intended. They are not a contribution to the doctrine of the eternal predestination of individuals to everlasting life or death. Their theme is not the election of individuals, but of a people. And the point of view from which the

¹ Rom. xi. 13, 14.

principle of election is contemplated is historical. The writer treats of Divine choices as they reveal themselves in this world in the career and destiny of nations. But still more important is it to note that in these chapters election is not conceived of as an arbitrary choice to the enjoyment of benefits from which all others are excluded. Election is to *function* as well as to favour, and the function has the good of others besides the elect in view. As the Jews, according to the Hebrew Scriptures, were chosen to be a blessing eventually to the Gentiles, so, according to the apostle, the Gentile no-nations were chosen in turn to be God's people for their own good doubtless, but also for the spiritual benefit of the temporarily disinherited Jews. It is unnecessary to point out that this view is in accordance with the uniform teaching of Scripture, and very specially with the teaching of Christ, in which the elect appear as the light, the salt, and the leaven of the world. It is a vital truth strangely overlooked in elaborate creeds large enough to have room for many doctrines much less important, and far from sufficiently recognised, as yet, even in the living faith of the church, though the missionary spirit of modern Christianity may be regarded as an unconscious homage to its importance.

Before passing from this topic it may be worth while to note the figures employed by the apostle to denote the function of the elect in reference to the world. Whereas our Lord employed for this purpose the emblems of light, salt, and leaven, St. Paul uses the analogies of the first-fruits of a harvest presented as an offering to God and so sanctifying the whole crop, and of the roots of a tree as determining the character of the tree and of its produce.¹ The former analogy assigns by implication to the elect representative character. They are the ten men in Sodom whose presence saves the whole guilty community. The latter analogy

¹ Rom. xi. 16.

ascribes to the elect a vital influence in society. They are the roots of the social tree, from which rises up through trunk and branches a spiritual sap to be ultimately transmuted into Christian deeds and virtues.

The apostle expresses his belief that Israel will at length be provoked to jealousy, in other words that the now unbelieving elect race will one day be converted to Christianity. This cheering hope occupies the principle place in his thoughts throughout the remainder of the eleventh chapter.¹ Here again he has recourse to metaphor to aid him in the expression of his views with regard both to the present and to the future. His figure this time is taken from the process of grafting. What has happened is that some branches of an olive tree have been broken off, and a wild olive slip, the Gentile church, has been grafted in their place. The branches were broken off for unbelief, but it is hoped that their unbelief will not be final, that on the contrary the severed branches will be regrafted on the tree.² The parable is in some respects defective. The disciple here comes far behind the Master, whose parabolic utterances were so true to nature. The process of grafting a wild slip on a good olive is in the natural sphere useless, and the process of regrafting broken-off branches impossible. But St. Paul's idea is clear enough. He expects a time when Jew and Gentile shall be united in one church. He cannot believe in the final unbelief of Israel. As little can he believe in the utter rejection of Israel. The character of God, as he conceives it, forbids the thought. God must be consistent with Himself, stable in his ways of acting, therefore it must be held firmly as a great principle that His gifts and calling are without repentance; always, of course, without prejudice to the Divine independence and freedom, which must ever be strenuously asserted against pretensions to perpetuity of privilege on the part either of Jew or of Gentile. For while

¹ *Rom.* xi. 23-36.

² *Rom.* xi. 17-23.

God owes nothing to man, he owes something to Himself. It is God-worthy to be unchanging, and on this firm foundation rests the great word : ἀμεταμέλητα τὰ χαρίσματα καὶ ἡ κλήσις τοῦ θεοῦ.

It is well to note here the relativity of Biblical utterances, and the necessity of balancing one statement against another. In a sentence going before the one just quoted the apostle ascribes ἀποτομία to God, in the Authorised Version rendered "severity," the literal meaning being propensity to prune or lop off. In this sentence, on the other hand, he ascribes to God just the opposite quality, a propensity to continue privileges once conferred. It is an antinomy, but not one of the kind which some have found in the apostle's writings, antinomies which he makes no attempt to reconcile, nay, does not even seem to be conscious of. He is conscious of the antinomy in this case, and offers a solution. His solution is to treat the pruning, the cutting off, or, to revert to a previous form of expression, the blinding or hardening, as partial and temporary. "All Israel shall be saved"¹ he boldly avers, taking courage from Old Testament texts which seem to point that way. The mystery of the past shall be matched by a mystery to be revealed in the future. The mystery of the past, hid *in* God, not from Him, only from men till the time of manifestation, was the admission of the outside nations to participation in the Messianic salvation. That mystery, of old a secret known only to the initiated few, inspired prophets and poets, is now a fact patent to all the world, a mystery no longer. The other mystery, the mystery of the future, is the ultimate softening of Israel's hard, impenitent heart, so that she shall be willing to be united with converted Pagans in one grand fellowship of faith and hope and worship. St. Paul expects this, because Israel, though hostile to Christianity, is yet beloved of Providence for the sake of devout forefathers, who trusted

¹ Rom. xi. 26.

God, served Him faithfully, and received from Him promises of eternal friendship.¹ He even expects it on the ground of equity, or what we may call poetic justice. As Gentiles have benefited from Jewish unbelief, receiving the offer of what Israel had refused, as the beggars in the highway were invited to the supper which well-to-do people had politely declined, so it was meet and fair that Jews should benefit from the mercy shown to Gentiles and at length share it with them.² So the final issue will be: all alike guilty in turn of unbelief, and all alike partakers of Divine mercy; no room for envy and to God all the glory.³

“God hath shut up all unto disobedience, that He might have mercy upon all.” Such is the last word of this magnificent apology at once for Paulinism and for Divine Providence. Like all great generalisations, it suggests more than it expressly teaches, fascinating the imagination by its vagueness and provoking questions which it does not answer. It breathes the spirit of optimism, and encourages the larger and even the largest hope, yet one knows not how far he may with certainty infer therefrom the final salvation of all men or even the conversion of the Jews. It looks as if St. Paul himself had been led on by the resistless logic of his great argument, and by the inspiration of the Divine Spirit, to pen a sentence whose depth he felt himself unable to fathom. And so argument gives place to worship, apologetic to admiration of the inscrutable wisdom of God, to whom be the glory for ever. Amen.⁴

A. B. BRUCE.

¹ Rom. xi. 28.

² vv. 30, 31.

³ v. 32.

⁴ vv. 33, 36.