

DOES ROMANS 9 TEACH INDIVIDUAL ELECTION UNTO SALVATION? SOME EXEGETICAL AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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Calvinists typically appeal to Romans 9 to support their theology of divine election.¹ In particular, they assert that Romans 9 teaches that God unconditionally elects individuals to be saved.² By "unconditionally" they mean that God, in eternity past, freely chooses specific individuals whom he will save (Eph 1:4) and that his choice is not based on their foreseen faith or effort (Rom 9:16). God does not simply foresee, say Calvinists, that certain people will put their faith in him, for apart from his work of grace to overcome their resistance to him no one would or could desire to come. Rather, he foreordains and determines that those who have been chosen will exercise faith.

The Calvinist exegesis of Romans 9, however, is increasingly questioned today.³ Many scholars believe that the doctrine of individual election unto salvation is read into the text by Calvinists and cannot be defended by an examination of the entire context of Romans 9-11. What I want to do in this article is to explain two of the objections to the Calvinist reading of Romans 9, and then to examine whether the objections are compelling and persuasive.

The two most common objections to the Calvinist interpretation of Romans 9 are as follows: (1) Romans 9 is wrongly explained if one understands it to refer to salvation. Paul is not referring to salvation in this text. Instead, the historical destiny of different nations (especially Israel) is being narrated. (2) Even if Romans 9 does relate to salvation in some sense, it does not refer to the salvation of individuals. The section relates to the salvation of groups, of corporate entities, and not to individuals.

Each of the two objections will be explained and examined more closely.

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¹ I am particularly grateful to Craig Blomberg, who carefully read this paper, pointed out some weaknesses, and helped me sharpen my argument at some points. It will become evident as the reader proceeds that Blomberg and I still disagree on some interpretive issues.

² For the best recent defense of this viewpoint see J. Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1-23* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983).

³ Actually Rom 9:1-29 is specifically in mind, but for convenience I shall often label the text as Romans 9 in this article.

I. HISTORICAL DESTINY OR SALVATION?

The first objection is that the text does not necessarily relate to salvation. Rather, Paul is describing the historical destiny of nations.⁴ For example, while discussing Rom 9:14–18 Roger Forster and Paul Marston say, “The question at issue is not the eternal destiny of anyone, but the history of Israel and their significance as the chosen nation.”⁵ This same understanding is reflected in a comment of Charles Cranfield on Rom 9:14–18:

It is important to stress that neither as they occur in Genesis nor as they are used by Paul do these words refer to the eternal destinies either of the two persons [Jacob and Esau] or of the individual members of the nations sprung from them; the reference is rather to the mutual relations of the two nations in history. What is here in question is not eschatological salvation or damnation, but the historical functions of those concerned and their relations to the development of the salvation-history.⁶

Others argue similarly that the temporal destinies of both Esau and Jacob are in view in both the OT citations (Gen 25:12; Mal 3:1) and in Rom 9:11–13.⁷ To understand that salvation is in view in the reference to Esau and Jacob in Romans is very unlikely, according to Craig Blomberg, because there is no doubt that the OT contexts refer to the temporal and historical destiny of peoples rather than to salvation.⁸

Despite the apparent plausibility and increasing popularity of the view that Paul is referring to historical destiny rather than salvation in Romans 9, it seems to me that such an interpretation is mistaken. (It should be noted, however, that Blomberg believes that single predestination to salvation is present in Rom 9:21–23 but should not be read into the earlier part of the chapter.)⁹ It is erroneous because it fails to account for both the specific context of Romans 9 and the wider context of Romans 9–11. In other words, what concerns Paul in Romans 9–11 is not merely that Israel has lost temporal blessings, or that its historical destiny has not evolved the way he anticipated. Paul agonizes over the place of Israel in Romans 9–11 because too many in his nation were not saved. The evidence to support that salvation is the issue in view is as follows.

⁴ So J. D. Strauss, “God’s Promise and Universal History: The Theology of Romans 9,” *Grace Unlimited* (ed. C. H. Pinnock; Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975) 195; L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 356.

⁵ R. T. Forster and V. P. Marston, *God’s Strategy in Human History* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1973) 67. They go on to say, “Neither Moses’ nor Pharaoh’s eternal destiny is in question. It is the bearing of Moses and Pharaoh on the earthly function and destiny of Israel that is at issue” (p. 75). And the choice of Isaac rather than Ishmael is described in similar terms (pp. 53–54). They assert that the choice of Isaac rather than Ishmael was not related to salvation but to God’s overall strategy in history.

⁶ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1979) 479.

⁷ Cf. C. L. Blomberg, “Elijah, Election, and the Use of Malachi in the Old Testament,” *Criswell Theological Review* 2 (1987) 109–116; W. S. Campbell, “The Freedom and Faithfulness of God in Relation to Israel,” *JSNT* 13 (1981) 29.

⁸ Blomberg, “Election” 109–111.

⁹ *Ibid.* 112–113.

1. *When Paul speaks of the anguish in his heart and his desire to be accursed because of his fellow Israelites (Rom 9:1–3), the reason he feels this way is not because Israel is merely losing out on temporal blessings. Distress torments his heart because his kinsmen from Israel were not saved. Paul is almost willing “to be separated from Christ” (9:3) because his fellow Israelites are separated from Christ.*

2. *The thesis of Romans 9–11 in 9:6 to the effect that “the word of God has not failed”¹⁰ refers to God’s promises to save his people Israel.¹¹ The assertion that God’s word has not failed in v. 6 should be linked to what Paul has just suggested in vv. 1–5 about his kinsmen being separated from Christ. He is not merely speaking of the temporal blessings of Israel in history, nor is he making a general statement about God’s strategy in history. The particular question in his mind in vv. 1–5 relates to the salvation of Israel, and thus the claim that God’s word has not failed (9:6) must be interpreted in relationship to the issue that is at the forefront of Paul’s mind—namely, the salvation of Israel.¹²*

Those interpreters who assert that Paul is referring merely to the historical destiny of Israel and not to salvation do not account plausibly for the relationship of vv. 1–5 to the rest of the chapter, for vv. 1–5 make it eminently clear that the reason Paul brings up the question of the faithfulness of God in v. 6 is that a great portion of Israel is not saved. Indeed, in the rest of Romans 9–11 Paul tries to unfold how God’s word has not failed, even though a large portion of ethnic Israel does not now believe in Christ. The succeeding verses (9:6b–11:36), therefore, are best understood as dealing with the specific issue that Paul raised in vv. 1–6a—namely,

¹⁰ So Cranfield, *Romans* 473; Campbell, “Freedom” 28.

¹¹ R. Badenas rightly sees the intimate connection between God’s faithfulness to his promises and the salvation of Israel in 9:6 (*Christ the End of the Law: Romans 10.4 in Pauline Perspective* [JSNTSup 10; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985] 85). Nonetheless, he still asserts that the subsequent verses do not relate to salvation.

¹² S. Williams questions such an interpretation in his review of Piper, *Justification*, because Rom 9:6 speaks of the faithfulness of God’s word to Israel in relation to the promise that Gentiles would be included in the people of God (*JBL* 104 [1985] 549–550). Williams also affirms that the separation of Israel from Christ in 9:3 is only temporary. God will eventually have mercy on all (11:32). Williams’ first point can be affirmed without affecting the main point being argued for here. One reason Paul brought up the salvation of Israel was precisely because if God’s promises to Israel could not be trusted, then how could Gentile believers be sure that the one who predestined them to salvation would bring about their promised glorification (8:28–30)? If God’s promises to Israel are left unfulfilled, then the Church can have no assurance that nothing will separate her from the love of Christ (8:35–39). Nevertheless this does not negate the fact that Paul is still referring to the salvation of ethnic Israel in these verses. That ethnic Israel is in view is rightly argued by B. W. Longenecker (“Different Answers to Different Issues: Israel, the Gentiles and Salvation History in Romans 9–11,” *JSNT* 36 [1989] 96–97). What Paul says about Israel has implications for the Gentiles, but it is not entailed that Paul is speaking about Gentile Christians in 9:6b–9. Williams’ second point cannot be examined in detail here, but it seems to suggest that Paul believed that all people would be saved and that the divine hardening will ultimately be lifted for all. In fact, Piper has elsewhere shown that universalism cannot plausibly be read out of Romans 11 (“Universalism in Romans 9–11? Testing the Exegesis of Thomas Talbot,” *Reformed Journal* 33 [1983] 12–13).

God's faithfulness to Israel, even though many Jews fail to believe in Christ.¹³ Interpreters who think Paul is describing the historical destiny of the nation apart from any reference to salvation are forced to say that Paul departs from the very issue that he brought up in 9:1–6a.

3. *The subsequent context in Rom 9:6b–29 also demonstrates that salvation is in view.* For example, Paul argues that mere ethnic descent from Abraham does not make anyone a child of God (9:6b–9). It is the children of the promise who are truly the children of God. The phrases “children of God” (*tekna tou Theou*, 9:8) and “children of the promise” (*tekna tēs epangelias*, 9:8) always refer in Paul to those who are the saved children of God (cf. 8:16, 21; Phil 2:15; Gal 4:28).¹⁴

In addition, Rom 9:11–12 confirms that the topic is salvation and not merely the reception of earthly promises, for Paul says that God's election is not based “on works but on the who one calls.” Elsewhere when Paul speaks of “works” he refers again and again to the thesis that no one can be justified by doing “the works of the law” or by doing any works at all (cf. 3:20, 27–28; 4:2, 6; 9:32; 11:6; Gal 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; Eph 2:9; 2 Tim 1:9; Titus 3:5). Since Paul typically claims that salvation is not by works, the burden of proof is on those who see him employing this terminology in a nonsalvific way in Rom 9:11–12. The specific context of Romans 9 confirms that salvation is in Paul's mind since his concern in 9:1–5 is that Israel is not saved.

2 Timothy 1:9 supports the idea that salvation is in view in Rom 9:11–12, for the subject matter of the verses is remarkably similar. 2 Timothy 1:9 says God “saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace that was given to us in Christ Jesus before the times of the ages” and is remarkably parallel to Rom 9:11–12. The parallels between the texts are at least fourfold: (1) Both speak of God's “call” (*kaleō*); (2) both stress that the call was not based on “works” (*erga*); (3) both refer to God's saving “purpose”

¹³ So Longenecker, “Different Answers” 96.

¹⁴ Blomberg's objection (“Election” 114) that “this proves too much” since Paul's goal is “to point out the perennial existence of a remnant *within Judaism*” does not seem convincing to me. I agree with Blomberg that Paul is probably speaking only of Jews in Rom 9:6–9, but such an admission hardly damages the point that when Paul says “children of God” (9:8) or “children of the promise” he is thinking of people who are saved. In this particular case he has in mind Jewish believers. All Blomberg's objection proves is that Paul is not referring to all Christians, but his comment hardly proves that Paul now uses the phrase “children of God” or “children of the promise” to refer merely to the reception of earthly promises. Paul typically uses these phrases to describe those who are part of the redeemed community, and the specific context of Romans 9 represents a narrowing of the term in the sense that Jewish Christians can also be designated as “children of God” and “children of the promise.” Paul restricts himself to describing Jews who are “children of God” and “children of the promise” because of the specific issue that he is examining—namely, the failure of many in Israel to believe (9:1–5). To put it another way: The larger set of “children of God” and “children of the promise” includes all those who believe, both Jews and Gentiles. But here in 9:8, because of the specific issue on his mind, Paul refers to a subset of “children of God” within the larger set. The fact that he refers to a subset within the larger set of those who are designated the children of God does not logically prove Blomberg's point that “children of God” does not refer to salvation here. In fact both the narrower context of Romans 9–11 and the Pauline usage of the phrase indicate that salvation is in Paul's mind.

(*prothesis*); (4) both say that this salvation was decided before human history began. It should also be noted that in 2 Tim 1:9 the calling is expressly defined as a saving one. Indeed, "calling" in Paul (Rom 9:7, 24, 25, 26; 1 Cor 1:9; Gal 1:6, 15; 5:8; Eph 4:1, 4; 1 Thess 2:12; 4:7; 5:24; 2 Thess 2:14; 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 1:9) is most often associated with a call to salvation. And Rom 9:24–26 in the near context clearly refers to the call of both Jews and Gentiles to salvation.

Romans 9:22–23 also suggests that Paul is speaking of salvation and eternal destruction, for he contrasts the "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" with the "vessels of mercy that were prepared beforehand for glory." The word for "destruction" (*apōleia*; Phil 1:28; 3:19; 2 Thess 2:3; 1 Tim 6:9) Paul often uses for eternal destruction, while "glory" (*doxa*; Rom 2:10; 8:18; 1 Thess 2:12; 2 Tim 2:10; cf. Col. 3:4) is sometimes utilized to describe eternal life. And we should note again that all of this fits with the main issue that troubled Paul when he wrote this chapter—namely, that Israel was not saved. He has not left this issue when he comes to the end of the chapter, for he cites Isaiah to the effect that "the remnant shall be saved" (Rom 9:27).¹⁵

4. *A compelling argument against the view that Paul is merely discussing the historical destiny of nations is the wider context of Romans 9–11.* It is generally agreed upon by NT scholars that these chapters are a unit and should be interpreted as such.¹⁶ If this is so, then it is unlikely that Paul treats one issue in 9:1–29 and then moves to an entirely separate question in 9:30–11:36. The point I am making is that if the subsequent context of Romans relates to the salvation of Israel (and Gentiles), it is probable that the previous context (9:1–29) does as well. The argument goes as follows:

When Paul says in 9:30–33 that Israel failed to attain righteousness by law because she did not pursue the law "from faith but as from works," it

¹⁵ Another argument in favor of the idea that Paul has salvation in mind in Romans 9 is the connection between 8:28–39 and 9:1–11:36. In 8:28–39 Paul asserts that those who have been predestined to salvation will be glorified, that God will give them all good things, that no charge will stand against them in God's court, and that nothing will separate them from the love of Christ. But how can believers count on these great saving promises in 8:28–39 if God's promises to Israel have not been fulfilled? If the saving promises made to Israel came to nought, then the saving promises made to the Church may as well. By affirming that God will fulfill his promises to Israel, Paul also assures the Church that the promises made in 8:28–39 will come to fruition. The link between 8:28–39 and chaps. 9–11 suggests that the saving promises of God are what Paul has in mind. For this same point see W. D. Davies, "Paul and the People of Israel," *NTS* 24 (1977–78) 13.

¹⁶ The unity of Romans 9–11 is a given in NT scholarship. Most recent NT scholarship on these chapters does not examine the theological issues being investigated in this article. Issues such as the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in Paul's theology, the consistency of the chapters, the light they cast on the Roman situation, and his view of ethnic Israel are at the forefront of NT scholarship today. For some representative examples see Longenecker, "Different Answers" 95–123; Campbell, "Freedom" 27–45; Badenas, *Christ the End* 81–96; M. A. Getty, "Paul and the Salvation of Israel: A Perspective on Romans 9–11," *CBQ* 50 (1988) 456–469; E. J. Epp, "Jewish-Gentile Continuity in Paul: Torah and/or Faith? (Romans 9:1–5)," *HTR* 79 (1986) 80–90; N. Walter, "Zur Interpretation von Römer 9–11," *ZTK* 81 (1984) 172–195.

is eminently clear that he is referring to Israel's failure to attain right standing with God. I know of no scholar who maintains that Paul is speaking merely of the earthly promises that Israel failed to obtain.

The issue of Israel's salvation or the lack thereof continues in chap. 10, for Paul informs the reader that his prayer to God is for Israel's "salvation" (10:1). The expression of Paul's desire for Israel in 10:1 is parallel to his anguish for Israel in 9:1-3, and in both texts the concern of Paul's heart is that Israel is not saved, that she is separated from Christ (cf. 9:3). In other words, since chaps. 9 and 10 both begin with the same concern (many in Israel are not saved), it is very improbable that chap. 9 relates merely to earthly promises for Israel while chap. 10 speaks of her failure to obtain salvation. Both chapters should be taken together (along with chap. 11) as an answer as to why many in Israel are not presently saved.

Israel's failure to obtain salvation and the inclusion of Gentiles into the people of God continue in the subsequent verses. Israel tried to establish her own righteousness (10:3), and thus she did not experience the righteousness that comes from God. Paul is referring to the fact that Israel has not been saved because she tried to establish her righteousness by works (10:4-8). And that Paul has salvation in mind is confirmed by 10:9-19, for v. 9 says that those who confess and believe in Jesus "will be saved." Indeed, Paul affirms that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (10:13). Israel's problem is that she has not "obeyed the gospel" (10:16), and thus the Gentiles have become recipients of salvation to provoke Israel to jealousy (10:19).

Romans 11 confirms the idea that all of Romans 9-11 should be understood as answering the question about the fulfillment of God's promises regarding the salvation of Israel, since Paul introduces himself as an illustration of a saved remnant (11:1-10). Paul does not introduce the concept of the remnant in order to say that the earthly promises given to Israel are coming to fruition in the remnant. His point is clearly that God has not forsaken his people Israel, because he is saving a portion of them.

It should be pointed out that some of the themes unfolded in 11:1-10 remind the reader of what Paul said in 9:6b-29. Both passages refer to God selecting a remnant out of ethnic Israel (9:6b-13, 27-29; 11:2-5), to the election of some (9:11-13, 24-26; 11:5-7), and to the hardening of others (9:17-18; 11:7-10). Presumably both passages speak to the same issue—namely, the salvation of Israel.

And Paul is not merely speaking of earthly promises or the temporal destiny of Israel in 11:11-32. The whole point of the olive-tree illustration is that God can graft back onto the tree those Jews who have disbelieved (cf. 11:23).¹⁷ The ingrafting of the Gentiles onto the olive tree demonstrates

¹⁷ Some scholars have recently said that Paul conceives of the salvation of Israel without requiring them to believe in Jesus as Messiah (cf. K. Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976] 4; F. Mussner, "Ganz Israel wird gerettet werden' (Röm 11:26)," *Kairos* 18 [1976] 241-255; L. Gaston, "Israel's Misstep in the Eyes of Paul," *Paul and the Torah* [Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1987] 135-150). But this interpretation has rightly been refuted (E. P. Sanders, "Paul's Attitude Toward the Jewish People," *USQR* 33 [1978] 175-187; F. Hahn, "Zum Verständnis von Römer 11.26a: '... und so

that salvation is in view, for they were not made partakers of the earthly promises given to Israel but were savingly made part of the people of God. Moreover the passage climaxes with the revelation of the mystery that "all Israel shall be saved" (11:26). The specific meaning of this verse is debated, but there is no doubt that Paul is here describing Israel's salvation from sin.

It seems clear that 9:30–11:36 relates to Israel's salvation (or lack thereof), but it seems to me that the implications of this fact need to be related to 9:1–29. Given the fact that Romans 9–11 is a unit, that there is no reason to think his major concern changes, and that there is specific evidence that Paul's concern is with Israel's salvation in 9:1–29, it is not surprising that Paul would describe in 9:30–11:36 why Israel fails to obtain salvation. It is quite improbable that in one context Paul is merely discussing the temporal destiny of Israel (9:6b–29) and that then in the succeeding passage he suddenly begins to explain why Israel failed to attain salvation (9:30–11:36). The unity of the text is such that all of Romans 9–11 constitutes Paul's answer as to how God's word has not failed with reference to the promises of salvation for Israel, even though many in Israel have not believed in Jesus as Messiah.

The four arguments I have described above suggest that the salvation of Israel is in view throughout Romans 9–11, but the strongest objection to the interpretation advanced here is that the use of the OT text shows that individual salvation is not in view in 9:6–21.¹⁸ The OT texts that Paul cites do not, according to some scholars, refer in their historical contexts to the damnation of individuals. So, it is claimed, there is no clear evidence that Ishmael, Esau and Pharaoh were damned. In fact it is pointed out that Esau was reconciled with his brother, showing he was saved (Genesis 33).

Blomberg asserts that there is no doubt that Gen 25:23 and Mal 1:2 refer only to temporal blessings for nations and not salvation.¹⁹ Without going into detail I would like to register my hesitation in thinking that Genesis and Malachi concern merely temporal matters. Temporal and salvific blessings cannot be separated so easily in the OT.²⁰ The permanent indignation of the Lord against wicked Edom in Mal 1:4 suggests that Edom is not part of the saved people of God.²¹ The promise of the inheritance probably refers to both salvation and temporal blessing.

wird ganz Israel gerettet werden." *Paul and Paulinism: Essays in Honour of C. K. Barrett* [ed. M. K. Hooker and S. G. Wilson; London: SPCK, 1982] 221–236; R. Hvalvik, "A 'Sonderweg' for Israel: A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11.25–27," *JSNT* 38 [1990] 87–107).

¹⁸ See Blomberg, "Election" 109–116.

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.* 109, 111.

²⁰ Blomberg's objection ("Election" 114–115) that this does not work since so many OT Jews rebelled is not compelling. The fact that not all ethnic Jews are children of the promise is precisely the point Paul is making in Rom 9:6–13. Not all ethnic Jews are recipients of the promise of salvation merely because they are ethnic Jews. There has always been a winnowing process.

²¹ In making this statement I am not asserting that every individual Edomite was doomed. The point is that the majority of Edomites were unsaved, and thus a general statement regarding their destiny can be made.

But even if these scholars are right in saying that the OT texts refer only to temporal blessings, it does not necessarily follow that these texts refer only to historical destiny when employed by Paul. The key question is how the texts are used in the specific context of Romans 9–11. The issue in Paul's mind is not, as we have seen, the earthly promises given to Israel. He is almost willing to be cursed and separated from Christ because his brothers are not saved (9:3; 10:1). It is the issue of the salvation of Israel that concerns Paul throughout all of Romans 9–11.

But if the OT texts employed in Romans 9 refer to the historical destiny of nations in the OT, how can we explain Paul using these same texts in a context that relates to salvation? Does he not contradict the meaning of the OT texts in their historical contexts? Not necessarily. When NT writers use the OT, they often do not intend to provide the meaning of the OT text in its historical context. The significance of the OT may be applied to new situations in the life of the Church. For example, Paul uses Isaac and Ishmael in another text (Gal 4:21–31) to illustrate that the sons of the free woman are heirs, not the sons of the slave woman. Virtually all scholars agree that Paul is departing from the historical meaning of the OT in this latter text, and that he is using Isaac and Ishmael to depict those who are saved and unsaved. This example is particularly illuminating because Isaac and Ishmael are also in view in Rom 9:6–9. Since they are used to illustrate issues pertaining to salvation in Galatians 4, such a usage is also possible in Romans 9.

But against what has just been said, one could object that Gal 4:24 specifically says that the OT text is being used allegorically. And Blomberg claims: "If a NT text can make sense in light of the plain meaning of the OT passages it cites, then one should not complicate matters by introducing new interpretations."²² This interpretive principle, however, is not adequate. Almost every use of an OT text in the NT can make sense by interpreting it in accord with the OT meaning.²³ The question though is whether such interpretations yield the most plausible sense. Such a principle probably straitjackets too much the use of the OT in the NT. A better principle is to determine first what makes best sense in the context in which the OT citation is used, for NT writers often apply OT texts to new situations.

²² Blomberg, "Election" 111.

²³ Witness W. C. Kaiser's valiant attempt to show that virtually every OT citation in the NT fits with the original meaning of the OT text (*The Uses of the Old Testament in the New Testament* [Chicago: Moody, 1985]). The problem with Kaiser's view is not that his specific proposals do not make sense. The issue is whether his solutions are plausible. They often are, but it seems to me that a more complex understanding of the relationship between the Testaments should be adopted. For a solution that is more satisfactory than Kaiser's see D. J. Moo, "The Problem of *Sensus Plenior*," *Hermeneutics, Authority, and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 179–211. On the use of the OT in Romans 9–11 see J. W. Aageson, "Scripture and Structure in the Development of the Argument in Romans 9–11," *CBQ* 48 (1986) 265–289; "Typology, Correspondence, and the Application of Scripture in Romans 9–11," *JSNT* 31 (1987) 51–72; C. A. Evans, "Paul and the Hermeneutics of 'True Prophecy': A Study of Rom 9–11," *Bib* 65 (1984) 560–570; O. Hofius, "Das Evangelium und Israel. Erwägungen zu Römer 9–11," *ZTK* 83 (1986) 297–324.

In any case it would not be surprising if Paul used Esau as an illustration of an unsaved person (Rom 9:11–13) since the writer of Hebrews seems to use him as an example of a person (Heb 12:16) who was unsaved. And even if Esau were saved, the author of Hebrews is using his renunciation of the birthright as an illustration to warn the Church about the danger of apostasy from salvation. In other words, if for the sake of argument we grant that Esau was saved, then the author of Hebrews employs his rejection of temporal blessings as an illustration of the danger of forsaking eternal salvation.²⁴ The way Hebrews uses the example of Esau is extremely important as a principal argument. For if Hebrews is saying that Esau is unsaved, then it would not be at all surprising if Paul draws the same conclusion in Romans 9. But if he were saved, then Hebrews is not citing the OT text in accord with its historical meaning but uses Esau to make a point regarding the salvation of the readers. Now if Hebrews uses Esau in such an illustrative fashion, then there is at least a precedent for Paul using the OT in the same way.²⁵

To conclude, the first objection to the Calvinist reading of Romans 9 is not persuasive, for the issue in Paul's mind in Romans 9–11 is not merely the historical destiny of Israel. What is at the forefront of his mind is the question of Israel's salvation.

II. CORPORATE OR INDIVIDUAL SALVATION?

The second objection (linked to the first for many scholars) to a Calvinist reading of Romans 9 is that even if the chapter refers to salvation, it describes the salvation of groups, not the salvation of individuals.²⁶ Thus William Klein says that "Paul's concern is the elect people of God, a corporate entity."²⁷ Leon Morris says, "It seems clear that Paul intends a reference to nations rather than individuals."²⁸ This interpretation is supported by showing that Paul is thinking of the nation of the Edomites in contrast to Israel (cf. Gen 25:13). Thus Cranfield says, "There is no doubt that the concern of Mal. 1:2–5 is with the nations of Israel and Edom, and it is natural to suppose that by 'Jacob' and 'Esau' Paul also understands not only the twin sons of Isaac but also the peoples descended

²⁴ For a defense of the idea that the author of Hebrews is warning the readers about apostasy in Heb 12:14–17 see P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 536–541; D. A. Hagner, *Hebrews* (New York: Harper, 1983) 205–208; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 364–368.

²⁵ Of course the connection between the use of Esau in Hebrews and Romans only stands if the context of Romans 9 also refers to salvation. But I have provided a number of specific reasons already why it does.

²⁶ So Badenas, *Christ the End* 85; C. Pinnock, "From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology," *The Grace of God, The Will of Man* (ed. C. H. Pinnock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 20.

²⁷ W. W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990) 166; cf. also pp. 173–175.

²⁸ Morris, *Romans* 356; cf. also his comments on pp. 345, 354, 363. Forster and Marston say, "People often fail to understand that in this whole section the apostle is talking about nations and not about individuals" (*God's Strategy* 59).

from them."²⁹ Those who emphasize that election is corporate rather than individual contend that this distinction helps one to see that God does not elect some individuals to salvation and reject others.

This second objection to a Calvinist reading of Romans 9 has persuaded many scholars. Nevertheless I will argue that the election Paul describes in this passage is both corporate and individual and that a reference to the former does not rule out the latter. Four lines of argument converge to support this thesis.

1. *Evidence that individual election is also in Paul's mind is found in Rom 9:15 where he cites Exod 33:19: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* The word "whom" (*hon*) is singular, indicating that specific individuals upon whom God has mercy are in view. The singular is also present in the inference Paul draws from Rom 9:15 in 9:16. God's mercy does not depend on "the one who wills, nor the one who runs." The conclusion to all of 9:14–17 in 9:18 utilizes the singular once again: "He has mercy on whom he wills, and he hardens whom he wills." 9:19 continues the thought in the same vein: "Who (*tis*) resists his will?" And Paul also uses the singular when he speaks of one vessel being made for honor and another for dishonor (9:21). Those who say that Paul is only referring to corporate groups do not have an adequate explanation as to why Paul uses the singular again and again in Romans 9.

2. *The selection of a remnant out of Israel (Rom 9:6–9; 11:1–6) also involves the selecting out of certain individuals from a larger corporate group.* Of course the remnant is a smaller group within a larger group. One should not conclude, however, that since the remnant is comprised of a group of people that individuals are not in view. Paul uses himself as an example of one who is part of the remnant (11:1). Clearly Paul is an individual who has been saved, and yet he is part of the remnant. The election of the remnant to salvation and the election of individuals who comprise that remnant are not mutually exclusive. They belong together.

3. *Romans 9:30–10:21 calls sharply into question the thesis that Paul is speaking only of corporate groups in Romans 9–11 and is not referring to individuals.* Calvinists have sometimes been criticized for not considering all of Romans 9–11 in formulating their doctrine of election.³⁰ But those who espouse the view that Paul is only speaking about corporate realities in Romans 9–11 are inconsistent with their own position in 9:30–10:21. We have already seen that all agree that Romans 9–11 is a unit and that it is a sustained attempt to demonstrate that God's word with reference to Israel has not fallen. But if the reference to Israel in Romans 9–11 is only corporate, then Israel's failure to pursue the law from faith, and her attempt to be righteous by works (9:30–10:8), must be exclusively a corpo-

²⁹ Cranfield, *Romans* 479–480; cf. also pp. 450, 489.

³⁰ Klein, *Chosen People* 174 n. 43, sees this as "one of the major flaws in Piper's book."

rate problem and not an individual one. But no interpreter that I know of has ever said that Israel's attempt to be righteous by works was only a corporate problem. Specific individuals within Israel are condemned because they have sought to establish their righteousness on the basis of works instead of submitting to the righteousness that comes from God, while other individuals—that is, those comprising the remnant—are saved by faith.

Now Paul does say that "Israel" (9:31; 10:19) as a whole or as a corporate entity has failed to attain the righteousness of God. Of course he is not intending to say that this is the case with every single individual within ethnic Israel, for elsewhere we are told that there is a remnant from ethnic Israel that is saved (9:6–9; 11:1–6). His point is that the majority of ethnic Israel has stumbled on the stumbling stone and has failed to believe in Christ (9:32–33). We can conclude, then, that Paul is speaking of corporate Israel in 9:30–10:21, but what he says about Israel corporately is also true of individual Israelites. One cannot legitimately say that Paul is merely describing corporate Israel but not individual Israelites.

The rest of Romans 10 proves that one cannot separate corporate Israel from individual Israelites. Again and again Paul emphasizes that one must exercise faith to be saved (10:4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 17). Obviously Paul can speak of Israel as a whole of falling short because so many within the nation have not exercised faith (10:19). But no one would assert that the failure to exercise faith was only a group problem and not an individual problem. One cannot sunder the connection between individuals and groups.

The conclusion I want to draw is this: If it is inappropriate to draw a distinction between individuals and groups in Rom 9:30–10:21, then there seems to be no exegetical basis for drawing such a distinction in 9:1–29 or 11:1–36. The three chapters are a unit, and the reference to Israel does not lurch between a reference only to corporate Israel in chaps. 9 and 11 and then refer to both individuals and groups in chap. 10. The reference to Israel must be interpreted consistently in the three chapters. Paul is describing Israel corporately, but the corporate group also involves individuals.³¹ Thus Romans 9 and 11 do describe the election of corporate Israel to salvation, but this election of corporate Israel by definition also includes the election of some individuals from within Israel.

4. To say that election involves the selection of one group rather than another raises another problem that warrants an extended explanation. Most scholars who claim election is corporate argue that personal faith is

³¹ Someone might object that this opens the door up to universalism since Rom 11:32 says, "God has shut up all to disobedience, in order that he might have mercy on all." One might conclude that if "all" refers to both corporate groups and individuals, then every individual will be saved. But we have already seen in 9:30–10:21 that Paul depicts Israel as a whole as disbelieving in the gospel without suggesting that every single individual Israelite is unsaved. Thus the "all" in 11:32 surely refers to a corporate group comprised of individuals, but it is unwarranted (given what Paul says elsewhere in Romans 9–11) to understand this "all" to refer to every single individual.

the ultimate and decisive reason why some people are saved rather than others. Calvinists, on the other hand, assert that faith is the result of God's predestining work. But those who opt for corporate election think that they have a better conception of election than Calvinists, and at the same time they can maintain that faith is what ultimately determines one's salvation. Now it seems to me that there is a flaw in this reasoning that is fatal to those who espouse corporate election. If God corporately elects some people to salvation, and the election of one group rather than another was decided before any group came into existence (9:11), and it was not based on any works that this group did or any act of their will (9:11-12, 16), then it would seem to follow that the faith of the saved group would be God's gift given before time began. But if the faith of any corporate entity depends upon God's predestining work, then individual faith is not decisive for salvation. What is decisive would be God's election of that group. In other words, the group elected would necessarily exercise faith since God elected this corporate entity.

But if what I have said above is correct, then one of the great attractions of the corporate view of election vanishes. Many find corporate election appealing because God does not appear as arbitrary in electing some to salvation and bypassing others. But if corporate election is election unto salvation, and if that election determines who will be saved, then God is not any less arbitrary. It hardly satisfies to say that God did not choose some individuals to be saved and passed by others but that it is true that he chose one group to be saved and bypassed another group.

Those who champion corporate election, however, would object, and I think the reason is that they do not really hold to corporate election of a group or of people at all. When those who advocate corporate election say that God chose "the Church," "a group," or a "corporate entity," they are not really saying that God chose any individuals that comprise a group at all.³² The words "Church" and "group" are really an abstract entity or a concept that God chose. Those who become part of that entity are those who exercise faith.³³ God simply chose that there be a "thing" called the Church, and then he decided that all who would put their faith in Christ would become part of the Church. In other words, the choosing of a people or a group does not mean that God chose one group of people rather than another, according to those who support corporate election. God chose to permit the existence of the entity called "the Church," which corporate whole would be populated by those who put their faith in Christ and so become part of that entity.

If corporate election involves the selection of an abstract entity like the Church, and then people decide whether or not to exercise faith and thereby become part of the Church, it seems to follow that the selection of the Church does not involve the selection of any individuals or group at all. Instead God determined before time that there would be a "thing"

³² I think this is a fair deduction from Klein's discussion (*Chosen People* 176-184) of election.

³³ So Klein, *Chosen People* 182.

called the Church and that those who exercise faith would be part of it. The problem with this view, however, is that the Church is not an abstract entity or a concept. It is comprised of people. Indeed the Biblical text makes it clear again and again that election involves the selection of people, not of a concept. For example: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph 1:4); "God chose the foolish . . . and God chose the weak . . . and God chose the base and despised" (1 Cor 1:27–28); "God chose you as the firstfruits for salvation" (2 Thess 2:13; cf. also Rom 9:23–25; 11:2; 2 Tim 1:9). The point I am trying to make is that those who advocate corporate election do not stress adequately enough that God chose a corporate group of people, and if he chose one group of people (and not just a concept or an abstract entity) rather than another group, then (as we saw above) the corporate view of election does not make God any less arbitrary than the view of those who say God chose certain individuals.

An analogy may help here.³⁴ Suppose you say, "I am going to choose to buy a professional baseball team." This makes sense if you then buy the Minnesota Twins or the Los Angeles Dodgers. But if you do this, you choose the members of that specific team over other individual players on other teams. It makes no sense to say "I am going to buy a professional baseball team" that has no members, no players, and then permit whoever desires to come to play on the team. In the latter case you have not chosen a team. You have chosen that there be a team, the makeup of which is totally out of your control. So to choose a team requires that you choose one team among others along with the individuals who make it up. To choose that there be a team entails no choosing of one group over another but only that a group may form into a team if they want to. The point of the analogy is that if there really is such a thing as the choosing of a specific group, then individual election is entailed in corporate election.

Those who espouse corporate election could counter, though, by stressing that election is "in Christ" (Eph 1:4).³⁵ The idea then is that Jesus Christ is the one whom God elected, and he has elected a corporate group, the Church, to be in Christ.³⁶ Forster and Marston say, "We are chosen in Christ. This does not mean that we were chosen *to be put into Christ*. . . . It means that as we repented and were born again into the body of Christ, we partake of his chosenness."³⁷ A few things should be said in response to this interpretation. First, the text does not specifically say that Christ was elected. The object of the verb "chose" is "us" in Eph 1:4. It is incorrect to see the emphasis on the election of Christ inasmuch as the verse stresses the election of people.³⁸ And since Eph 1:4 says that we "were chosen

³⁴ This analogy was suggested to me by Bruce Ware.

³⁵ Klein, *Chosen People* 179–180; Forster and Marston, *God's Strategy* 97 131–132.

³⁶ I am distinguishing this view from that of K. Barth (*Church Dogmatics* II.2.1–506), for Barth's view seems to lead to universalism. Cranfield's own exegesis (*Romans* 448–450) has been decisively influenced by Barth. P. K. Jewett effectively critiques the Barthian view (*Election and Predestination* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985] 47–56).

³⁷ Forster and Marston, *God's Strategy* 97.

³⁸ Contra M. Barth, *Ephesians* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1974) 1.107–108.

before the foundation of the world," there is no evidence that the choice was based on our foreseen faith. To claim (as Forster and Marston do) that the faith of people is decisive reverses the emphasis of the text, for Eph 1:4 (and all of 1:3–14) focuses on the work of God, and thus to insert faith into the verse is to smuggle in an idea that is not stated. Moreover, Rom 9:11–13 confirms what we have suggested from Eph 1:4—namely, that faith is the result of being chosen.

Second, when the text says "he chose us in him" it probably means that God chose that the Church would experience salvation "through Christ." He is the agent and person through whom the electing work of God would come to fruition. When God planned to save some, he intended from the beginning that their salvation would be effected through the work of Christ. Third, thus it seems to me that those who stress that election is "in Christ" end up denying that God chose a corporate group in any significant sense. All God's choice of a corporate group means is that God chose that all who put their faith in Christ would be saved. Those who put their faith in Christ would be designated the Church.

Those who defend corporate election are conscious of the fact that it is hard to separate corporate from individual election, for logic would seem to require that the individuals that make up a group cannot be separated from the group itself. Klein responds by saying that this amounts to an imposition of modern western categories upon Biblical writers.³⁹ He goes on to say that it requires a "logic that is foreign to their thinking."⁴⁰ Clark Pinnock also says that the Arminian view is more attractive because he is "in the process of learning to read the Bible from a new point of view, one that I believe is more truly evangelical and less rationalistic."⁴¹ Those who cannot see how election is corporate without also involving individuals have fallen prey to imposing western logic upon the Bible.

I must confess that this objection strikes me as highly ironic. For example, Klein also says that it makes no sense for God to plead for Israel to be saved (Rom 10:21) if he has elected only some to be saved.⁴² But this objection surely seems to be based on so-called western logic. Klein cannot seem to make sense logically of how both of these can be true, and so he concludes that individual election is not credible. Has he ever considered that he might be forcing western logic upon the text and that both might be true in a way we do not fully comprehend? Indeed, one could assert that the focus upon individual choice as ultimately determinative in salvation is based on "western" logic inasmuch as it concentrates upon the individual and his or her individual choice. And on the same page that Pinnock says he is escaping from rationalism, he says he cannot believe

³⁹ Klein, *Chosen People* 264; cf. also p. 260.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 264.

⁴¹ Pinnock, "Augustine" 21. He goes on to say, "Of course, there will be some nostalgia when we leave behind the *logically* and beautifully tight system of determinist theology" (p. 28; *italics mine*).

⁴² Klein, *Chosen People* 267.

"that God determines all things and that creaturely freedom is real" because this view is contradictory and incoherent. He goes on to say, "The *logic* of consistent Calvinism makes God the author of evil and casts serious doubt on his goodness."⁴³ These kinds of statements from Pinnock certainly seem to reflect a dependence on western logic.

Now most Calvinists would affirm that logic should not be jettisoned, but they would also claim that the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility is finally a mystery. The admission of mystery demonstrates that Calvinists are not dominated by western logic. In fact it seems to me that those who insist that human freedom and individual faith must rule out divine determination of all things are those who end up subscribing to western logical categories.

My own view of the role of logic needs to be clarified here so that what I have just said will not be misunderstood. The law of noncontradiction was not invented by Aristotle. It was articulated and defended by him and is characteristic of all meaningful human thought and speech. That which is contradictory cannot be true. Thus it is legitimate to ask if a particular theological position is contradictory or illogical. The law of noncontradiction cannot be dismissed as western, in my opinion, for all people intuitively sense that what is contradictory cannot be true. This explains why Klein and Pinnock revert to the law of noncontradiction even while claiming that they are freeing themselves from western logic.

Nevertheless, to subscribe to the law of noncontradiction does not mean that logic can resolve every problem in theology. There are times when Scripture strongly affirms two realities that cannot finally be resolved logically by us. For example, the doctrines of the Trinity and of the two natures of Christ in one person are theological constructs that are rightly derived from the Bible, and yet we cannot ultimately explain how there can be three persons and yet only one God. This does not mean that the doctrine of the Trinity is irrational. It means only that it is above our present rational capacities. Such mysteries should only be adopted if that is where the Biblical evidence leads. I believe the Biblical evidence compels us to see such a mystery in the case of divine election and human responsibility. On the other hand, a mystery is not required in the case of corporate election, and so there is no need to postulate a discontinuity between corporate and individual election. In fact individual election cannot be dismissed, since it is taught in too many texts (John 6:37, 44–45, 64–65; 10:26; Acts 13:48; 16:14; etc.).

Biblical exegesis requires us, then, to see a mystery in the case of divine election and human responsibility. Romans 9 teaches that God does elect individuals and groups unto salvation, and he determines who will exercise faith. Nevertheless, Rom 9:30–10:21 teaches us that those who do not exercise faith are responsible and should have done so. How can both of these be logically true? We cannot fully grasp the answer to this question, for as

⁴³ Pinnock, "Augustine" 21 (*italics mine*).

with other mysteries in Scripture we affirm that our human minds cannot adequately grasp the full import of divine revelation.

III. CONCLUSION

In this article I have explored whether two of the main objections to a Calvinist exegesis of Romans 9 are persuasive. Those objections are (1) that Romans 9 does not relate to salvation at all but to the historical destiny of Israel and its role in temporal history and (2) that the election described in Romans 9 is not an individual election unto salvation but is corporate. I have argued that neither of these objections works. The first one fails because the entire context of Romans 9–11 relates to the salvation of Israel. When Paul introduces the chapters in 9:1–5 he makes it plain that he would almost wish to be cursed because his kinsmen from Israel are not saved. It is this question of Israel's salvation (or the lack thereof) that informs all three chapters. Since the specific issue that introduces Romans 9–11 relates to salvation, it is quite improbable that Paul would insert a discussion in chap. 9 about the earthly promises given to Israel and then suddenly revert back to the main issue of salvation in 9:30–11:36.

The second objection to the Calvinist reading of Romans 9 also fails to convince because corporate and individual election are inseparable. The recipients of God's electing work are often referred to in the singular in chap. 9, and the selection of a remnant implies that some individuals were chosen out of a larger group. In addition, those who advocate corporate election claim chaps. 9 and 11 refer to corporate Israel, whereas Paul speaks of individual Israelites in chap. 10. There is no exegetical justification for such a shift. It seems to be due to a philosophical bias that cannot see how individuals can still be held responsible if divine election is true. Moreover those who advocate corporate election are vague in their own description of what corporate election involves. The way corporate election is defined makes it doubtful that they are describing election of a group at all. I conclude, then, that the Calvinist view that God chose individuals to be saved is more persuasive both exegetically and theologically.