

Romans 9 - Unfaithful Israel and Faithful God

“As previously discussed, although Paul regularly uses the term *Ioudaios* (‘Jew’) elsewhere, Rom. 9 marks a sudden shift to ‘Israel’ terminology, which appears only six other times in the undisputed letters but thirteen times in Rom. 9-11 (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 183).”

“Indeed, Paul never refers ‘*the Jews*’ at all in Romans, only to ‘Jews’ without the definite article, and that only twice (9:24; 10:12). To understand Paul’s arguments in this tightly argued section, it is imperative to pay attention to Paul’s precise word choices, including close consideration of what he does *not* say (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 183).”

So much of Paul has been read through the lenses of modern and reformation era paradigms that the intention and implication of Paul’s argument has been lost in identity politics and denominational polemics. Paul is not arguing based on a Christian/Israelite paradigm. For Paul, the idea of what we understand to be “Christian” does not exist.

We have to deal with Paul on Paul’s terms and leave behind our preconceived ideas and modern formulations.

“Instead, he is writing as a restorationist Jew at a time when the Jesus movement was still overwhelmingly Jewish, as is evident by the very fact that he has to fight so hard for the inclusion of the uncircumcised (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 184).”

Not All from Israel are Israel

“The implication is that just as Moses delivered the covenant with much of Israel already in breach of that covenant at the moment of its delivery, so also Paul stands in the place of Moses administering a new covenant – and interceding for the disobedient – in similar circumstances (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 188).”

Verse 9:6 - “With this statement, Paul clarifies that his lament is not for *Israel*, which will indeed be saved in its entirety (11:26), but for those disobedient *Israelites* who stand in danger of being excluded from Israel (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 188-89).”

“In this respect, Rom. 9:6 says nothing new or unusual - certainly no more radical than Hosea’s declaration that the Israelites to whom he preached were ‘not my people’ (Hos. 1:9) - but instead restates a core component of traditional covenantal theology: God will always preserve Israel, but individual participation in those blessings is not guaranteed (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 189).”

“In contrast, Paul’s argument carries forward Deuteronomy’s emphasis on the incongruity of God’s choice in light of Israel’s unworthiness:

“When the LORD your God thrusts them out before you, do not say to yourself, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to occupy this land’; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you. 5 It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you are going in to occupy their land; but because of the wickedness of these nations the LORD your God is dispossessing them before you, in order to fulfill the promise that the LORD made on oath to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. 6 Know, then, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to occupy because of your righteousness; for you are a stubborn people.” - Deuteronomy 9:4-6

(Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 190).”

“Moreover, as illustrated by God’s selection of the patriarchs and Israel itself, no one can presume special access to that mercy. The patriarchs and Israel were not chosen because of their justice/righteousness, and the Torah did not restrain Israel from doing the things the nations did (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 190).”

“Consequently, rather than being based on God’s obligation to the people, Israel’s salvation depends on God extending mercy far beyond the requirements of justice and his obligation to the covenant, as the covenant was already broken at its very inception (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 191).”

“That is, rather than asking whether resisting God is *theoretically* possible, Rom. 9:19 asks the *empirical*, historical question of whether anyone has in fact resisted God, which fits better in the discussion of Israel’s history to this point (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 192).”

“This rebuke (Rom. 9:20) introduces a passage resounding with scriptural echoes, as the potter/clay relationship is frequently used as an image for God’s dealings with humanity in general and Israel in particular. Although many have assumed the lump here refers to humanity as a whole, the context still concerns God’s dealings with Israel, governed by the thesis of 9:6 that not all descended from Israel share the same fate (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 192-93).”

“Once the precise terminology of the passage is better understood, it becomes clear that this verse says nothing of ‘enduring’ vessels nor of predestination to destruction (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 194).”

“This reading (Rom. 9:22 - ‘produced’) makes significantly more sense in the context of the metaphor, as it represents the potter showing ‘much patience’ in the process of producing vessels of wrath. That is, rather than passively waiting and enduring the clay, the potter is actively and patiently involved in the process of trying to change the clay’s shape (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 196).”

“The upshot of recognizing these nuances of divine patience and adaptation is that it depicts some more dynamic relationship between the potter and clay than is typically assumed by modern interpreters who arrive at this passage under the presumption that the potter/clay imagery serves as a defense of God’s arbitrary choice (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 197).”

“Instead, just as a master, potter improvises and changes his plans based on the response of the clay, so also God declares, ‘can I not do the same to you as this potter, O house of Israel?... See, you are in my hand like the clay in the potter’s hand’ (Jer 18:6). The fundamental lesson of the potter and clay analogy is not that God works arbitrarily, but rather that, although God ultimately decides the fate of humans and nations, those decisions are contingent on his interactions with human beings, who can and do resist his will (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 198).”

“... the ‘vessels of wrath’ in verse 22 are best understood primarily as *instruments* rather than as *objects* of God’s wrath, especially since the prior verse has already established that the potter is making different kinds of vessels, each with a particular *function*, whether honorable or dishonorable (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 200).”

“On the contrary, as has been demonstrated throughout this study, when Paul appears to be obscure, it usually signals engagement with scriptural inter texts. Moreover, this use of Hosea and the application of the ‘not my people’ (Hos 1:9) motif to gentiles at this point in the argument is neither arbitrary nor obscure. Instead, the scriptural background of the citation - namely, that Hosea’s promises were made to northern Israel - is instrumental to the argument (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 202).”

“In this larger context, the point of this conclusion is precisely that God is now calling vessels of mercy from the nations among which Israel was sown (Zech 10:9; cf. Hos 2:25), with the previously dishonored vessels being redeemed and transformed into new instruments of God’s mercy and being used for God’s purpose of transforming the world through his people after all (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 204).”

On the “not my people”

“The fact that Deut 32:21 (which Paul cites in Rom 10:19) uses the title ‘not people’ specifically to refer to gentiles outside the covenantal people provides a natural lens through which to interpret Hosea’s ‘not my people’ as a declaration that the northern house of Israel *has become* gentiles (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 206).”

“What makes Paul’s argument distinctive here is that he takes one more logical step: if these Israelites have indeed become gentiles (‘not my people’), their redemption by definition requires inclusion of gentiles (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 206).”

“It should be noted, however, that Paul portrays the clay not as finished and hardened but rather as still in the molding process. That is, he says nothing of the potter ‘breaking the flawed pot to reconstruct it’ as though the pot were already formed (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 210).”

“In light of God’s pathos and mercy, the potter/clay imagery therefore serves as a call to repentance for those vessels that are as yet unfinished and unhardened... In this respect, the lesson of the potter and clay is that although God does have the autonomy to show mercy to whomever he chooses, God does not act arbitrarily but always in responsive relationship with the vessel being formed (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 211).”

“Israel’s infidelity and failure is neither surprising nor does it require explanation. But that *gentiles attained the justness attested by Torah and are partaking is Israel’s promises is scandalous* (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 215).”

“As Wagner explains, both of the ‘stumbling stone’ (Isaiah 8:14; 28:16) passages occur at the climax of prophetic rebukes about Israel’s attempts to save itself in the face of the Assyrian threat through political machinations, foreign treaties, and military strength rather than by trusting YHWH (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 216).”

“And the reason they did not attain Torah or justness is that pursuing the Torah itself ‘as if from works’ rather than pursuing justness itself effectively made the *means* into the end (*telos*), stumbling over the Torah itself and falling short of both (9:32) (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 218).”

“This discussion of Israel’s past failings therefore does have strong implications regarding Paul’s contemporary fleshly kin, but a solely christological reading of the stumbling stone puts the cart before the horse and misses the force of Paul’s rhetoric throughout this section: those from Israel who are now resisting the gospel are repeating and persisting in their biblical forebear’s infidelity, which is what led to Israel’s present need for redemption in the first place, and without change course, those who refuse to submit to Israel’s messiah will end up like their unfaithful predecessors (Staples, *Paul and the Resurrection of Israel*, 219).”