



Olive Press Quarterly

ROMANS 9: 1-5

Exploring a key Biblical text

by

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The Editor

ROMANS 9:1-5

Exploring a key Biblical text

New International Version:

:1 I speak the truth in Christ-I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit- :2 I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.

:3 For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, :4 the people of Israel. Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. : 5 Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, for ever praised! Amen. (NIV)

Complete Jewish Bible:

*:1 I am speaking the truth- as one who belongs to the
Messiah, I do not lie; and also bearing witness is my
conscience, governed by the Ruach HaKodesh :2 my
grief is so great, the pain in my heart so constant, :3
that I could wish myself actually under God's curse
and separated from the Messiah, if it would help my
brothers, my own flesh and blood, :4 the people of
Israel! They were made God's children, the
Sh'kkinah has been with them, the covenants are
theirs, likewise the giving of the Torah, the Temple
service and the promises; :5 the Patriarchs are
theirs: and from them, as far as his physical descent
is concerned, came the Messiah, who is over all.*

Praised be ADONAI for ever! Amen. (CJB)

Introduction

In establishing a coherent Biblical foundation for the Church's ministry among Jewish people a key text is Romans 9-11ⁱ. Within these chapters one comes face to face with Paul's own deep questions of faith and hope as one encounters the purposes of God. The significance of Romans 9-11 has been stressed by numerous Christian theologians, but none more eloquently than by Thomas Merton who states,

I am more and more convinced that
Romans 9-11 are the key to everything
today. This is the point where we have to
press and search and listen to the word.

From here we enter the understanding of scripture, the wholeness of revelation and of the churchⁱⁱ.

David Stern also helpfully states,

Chapter 9-11 of the book of Romans contain the New Testament's most important and complete discussion of the Jewish People. In them God promises that "all Israel will be saved" (11:26) and commands that Gentile Christians show to the Jews God's mercy (11:31). In the face of what these chapters teach, every form of Christian anti-Semitism stands condemned; and every claim whether by

Jews or Christians, that the Gospel is not for Jews must collapseⁱⁱⁱ.

Romans 9-11, is an integral part of Romans. It is an essential part of the central theme of the letter, which is the “gospel of God” (1:1). Paul seeks to encourage and instruct the Christians (both Jew and Gentile) in Rome and to present to them in the fullest possible way the heart of the gospel that has transformed his own life and empowered his ministry. Also probably, Paul is looking to address some misunderstandings which may have arisen from his earlier letters (such as Galatians) and which may have led to some Gentile Christians in Rome developing an “anti-Jewish” stance in their thinking and doing. Such a stance may have been

enhanced by the expulsion of the Jewish community from Rome under the reign of Claudius^{iv}.

Within Romans 9-11, Paul, a “servant of Christ Jesus” (1:1) is ministering both as an Apostle of the Church (with a particular Gentile focus) and as a Prophet of and to Israel. Paul’s critique of Israel is therefore largely a critique from within the community of Israel. This dual role and calling helps to give to Paul’s teaching a particular dynamic and resonance for contemporary engagements within the fields of Jewish-Christian relations, the Church’s ministry among Jewish people and within emerging forms of Messianic Judaism.

The text. (:1-5)

Romans 9:1-5 begins with a personal lament and significant spiritual vulnerability. These verses make it clear that Paul has a great and deep love for the people of Israel. This love hurts. Paul identifies in the strongest possible way with the Jewish people. His faith in Yeshua and his subsequent Apostolic ministry has not despite what may have been suggested by some of his opponents undermined his love and loyalty for the people of Israel or his own identity as a Jew.

Paul's love, loyalty and prayerful passion would lead him, if this were possible^v to be cut off from Messiah if in some way this would help his people. This willingness to be cut off has strong echoes

with Moses^{vi} (Exodus 32:30-32) and on a different level with the ministry of Yeshua who was cut off and cursed (becoming sin) through his own atoning death (2 Corinthians 5:21).

In verse 4 Paul uses the term “the people of Israel”. The term “Israel” opens up one of the core issues in Romans 9-11. How one interprets the term Israel and its eleven uses within Romans 9-11 will greatly shape the application of the text. Douglas Moo in his commentary on Romans is helpful on this point, he states,

Paul’s selection of the term “Israelites” to head this list is significant. For in contrast to the colourless, politically and nationally

orientated title “Jew”, “Israelite” connotes the special religious position of the members of the Jewish People It is therefore no accident that Paul in Rom 9-11 generally abandons the word “Jew” which has figured so prominently in chaps 1-8, in favour of the terms “Israelite” and “Israel”. Paul is no longer looking at the Jews from the perspective of the Gentiles and in their relationship to the Gentiles but from the perspective of salvation history and in their relationship to God and his promises to them.

The application “Israelites” then is no mere political or nationalistic designation

but a religiously significant and honorific title. And despite the refusal of most of the Israelites to accept God's gift of salvation in Christ , this title has not been revoked. Here is set up the tension that Paul seeks to resolve in these chapters^{vii}

In terms of verse 4, I would understand that Paul here is using the term to refer to all Jewish people. For Paul here all Jews are Israelites, in this context Paul is speaking from within his own people's self-definition of themselves as God's covenant people. However, David Stern in his excellent Jewish New Testament commentary differs from my understanding and states,

Sha'ul is not speaking of all Jews but only those who have not come to trust in Yeshua^{viii}.

Stern takes this different line for he understands that the context of Paul's longing for his brothers (:3) and the people of Israel (:4) is the context of coming to trust in Yeshua. So Stern sees that in Paul's mind there must be a separation within the people of Israel at this point. Clearly this is a point that Paul's goes on to develop in 9:6 and within the Olive tree teaching (11:17-24) yet on balance at this opening point of Paul's argument I understand that Paul has in his mind Israel as a whole. His longing is for the people as a community in its entirety.

Paul then continues in these verses to outline the great heritage, blessing and responsibility of Jewish identity. This list of eight blessings may well have echoes for Paul of the midrash material based on Genesis 1:4. This material teaches that six things^{ix} were contemplated by God before the creation of the world- The Torah (Proverbs 8:22), the throne of God (Psalm 93:2), the Patriarchs (Hosea 9:10), Israel (Psalm 74:2), the Temple (Jeremiah 17:12) and the Messiah (Micah 5:2). For Paul the gift of receiving the Torah (the Law) is part of the outworking of the covenantal relationship (covenantal faithfulness) for the people of Israel. This is an important theme of Paul's teaching. The gift of Torah from Paul's perspective must not be

seen as an integral part of a failed scheme of
'Jewish works righteousness'.

This great list of Jewish blessings climaxes with the gift of Messiah and concludes with an outpouring of praise. How one sets out this final part of verse 5 has significant Christological implications. If one follows the English text as given in the NIV, NRSV, KJV, JB, and the NASB, one is presented with a direct identification of the Messiah with God. This interpretation was the overwhelming interpretation of the early Patristic period. Such an identification stands alongside general interpretations of other key Christological New Testament texts such as John 1:1, 1:14, 10:30,

20:28, Romans 10:13, Colossians 1:19, Titus 2:13 and Hebrews 1:3. However, if one follows the English text as given in the RSV, NEB and the CJB, one is presented with a separation of the statement about the Messiah from the ascription of praise to God.

Issues from the text for the Church's ministry among Jewish people.

There are clearly numerous issues which arise from reflection and discussion of Romans 9:1-5. I will focus in on the following four.

Firstly, one is faced with Paul's deep concern^x for his fellow Jewish people. Paul knows that if his

fellow Jewish people do not recognise and receive Yeshua then they will not enter into the saving promises of God. Paul clearly believes that it is only through the atoning death and glorious resurrection of Yeshua that both Jews and Gentiles can enter fully into the saving promises of God. For Paul there is no separate Jewish route into the saving promises of God. There is no route that bypasses Yeshua. Paul is proclaiming the gospel of God (1:1) for the full salvation of the Jew (first) and also the Gentile (1:16). If one is to be an advocate for a “Two- Covenant”^{xi} understanding of God’s purposes within Jewish-Christian relations then how does one account for Paul’s heart-rending anguish for his own Jewish community who have

largely not recognised and received Yeshua? It is my reading of Paul that any support for a “Two Covenant” approach cannot be sourced from the Pauline corpus.

Secondly, Paul shows in these verses that in becoming a follower of Yeshua he does not cease to have a Jewish identity. Paul speaks of “my brothers”, “my race”. This identification is not in the past but rather a passionate daily reality for Paul. A similar identification is also shared today by many Jewish Believers in Yeshua. In fact, many Jewish Believers in Yeshua would understand that their love and loyalty to their fellow Jews and Jewish heritage has been significantly enhanced and renewed through their commitment to Yeshua

and the wider Body of the Messiah. For Jewish Believers in Yeshua it is not simply that believing in Yeshua is a legitimate expression of Jewish identity which it is, but rather it is the pinnacle of Jewish identity.

The reality of Jewish Believers in Yeshua must, I believe, be taken seriously and respectfully within the Church's ministry among Jewish people and within wider fields of Jewish-Christian Relations.

This clearly is a huge and controversial issue for many who see Jewish Believers in Yeshua as either traitors to, or simple deceivers of, the wider Jewish community. This plea to engage seriously and respectfully with Jewish Believers in Yeshua^{xii} is made powerfully by Walter Riggans who states,

...it is surely tragically immature and self serving of both the Church and the Synagogue to refuse Messianic Jews any participation at all in the modern movement to build bridges among religious communities. If it is decided that Messianic Jews cannot be considered to be authentic members of the body of the Messiah, or that they do not qualify as authentically Jewish then let that point emerge from a genuine meeting of minds and spirits^{xiii}.

Thirdly, Paul in outlining the blessings of Jewish identity is in part challenging the position of

arrogance and false triumphalism that is often rooted in rigid structures of Replacement Theology. Replacement Theology seeks to break the flow between the Biblical covenants to the Jewish people and the “New Covenant” through Yeshua. Such a break fails to celebrate the sense of continuation and fulfilment of the Biblical witness.

Fourthly, the issues raised by the debate over the interpretation of the praise doxology (:5) in terms of wider Christology is important. The Divinity of Messiah is a core truth of the Church’s teaching and is explicit within creedal statements. Yet within some aspects of developing Messianic Jewish Theology there appears to be some space to

reformulate traditional (Nicean) Christology in order to communicate effectively within the contemporary Rabbinic Jewish context. Richard Harvey in a Mishkan article engages with this issue, he states,

Stern addresses (in the Jewish New Testament Commentary) such questions as “Is Yeshua God? And “Is God a Trinity?” but tries to push past the reflex responses of “Absolutely” (Christian) and “Absolutely not” (Jewish) in order to discuss the substance of the matter—what positive and negative answers might mean and whether both Christian and Jewish contexts might admit of “less

confrontational formulations without
compromising the scriptural data^{xiv}

Dwight Pryor also helpfully engages in this debate
and writing in the same Mishkan edition states,

I am simply noting that the severe
monotheism of Islam differs from the
unified monotheism of Judaism and
Christianity in a way parallel to the
differences between yahid (singular-
“one”) and ehad (“one” of unity) The God
of the Bible has an inner harmony and
indivisible unity of all that he does and is.
In his oneness there is a plurality-in unity-
a unity that must not be broken, a plurality
that must not be diminished. Unlike the

uniformity of monism, biblical
monotheism is irreducibly relational and
characterised at its core by love^{xv}.

This work by Stern, Harvey, Pryor and others
seems to me to have within it some potentially very
helpful elements for the Church's ministry among
Jewish people and for the wider field of Jewish-
Christian relations. Also the experience of
Messianic Jewish worshipping and witnessing
communities within the wider community of the
Body of Messiah may be the key places for helping
to re-contextualise traditional Christian doctrine
which could lead to a real engagement with both
contemporary rabbinic Jewish communities and
also some Islamic communities. Clearly such work

has dangers namely old heresies such as Modalism^{xvi} and Adoptianism^{xvii} may reappear simply clothed in Messianic Jewish language.

In conclusion, Romans 9:1-5 opens up much to help shape the Church's ministry among Jewish people and while at times there may not be unanimity in terms of interpreting and applying the text surely the love, understanding, passion and vulnerability which Paul shows in these opening verses of Romans 9-11 is needed in full measure by all who seek to serve and reach out in the name of Yeshua in this generation.

ⁱ In this article I will be focusing on Romans 9:1-5. I hope in subsequent Olive Press publications to focus on other segments of Romans 9, Romans 10 and Romans 11.

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- ⁱⁱ Thomas Merton, *A vow of conversation*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988.
- ⁱⁱⁱ David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. Clarksville, Jewish New Testament Publications 1992 (6th edition) :385
- ^{iv} This expulsion probably took place in the year 49 (see Acts 18:2). This expulsion edict was lifted under the reign of Nero some five years later. This was probably three years before Paul wrote Romans.
- ^v Paul had previously (Romans 8:39) made the explicit claim that nothing can in fact cut off the Believer in Yeshua from their love and destiny which is in and through Yeshua.
- ^{vi} It is of interest for example that Douglas Moo in his commentary on Romans (*The Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996) points out a number of illusions to Moses within Romans 9-11 and sees that it is highly likely that Paul does come to see Moses as his own 'model for ministry'. However, Dwight Pryor in his seminar teaching notes on Romans (distributed by the Centre for Judaic-Christian studies) makes a powerful case that Paul's main ministry model from Jewish history in which he identifies is not Moses but the Prophet Jeremiah.
- ^{vii} Douglas Moo. *The Epistle to the Romans*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans 1996 :561
- ^{viii} David Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary*. Clarksville, Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992 (6th edition) :526.
- ^{ix} This may have links with the six days of creation.
- ^x This desire of Paul takes the form of a heartfelt prayer in Romans 10:1.
- ^{xi} Two-Covenant Theology (sometimes known as Dual Covenant or the two ways) teaches that there is a "Jewish way" to God through covenantal faithfulness and a Gentile way through the ministry of Jesus. See the Mishkan Journal, Issue 11, 1989 for a helpful in-depth analysis of Two-Covenant Theology.
- ^{xii} Walter Riggans in the quote below uses the term "Messianic Jews" rather than my preferred term "Jewish Believers in Yeshua". Yet I think in the vast majority of cases the terms are interchangeable.
- ^{xiii} Walter Riggans, *Messianic Judaism and Jewish-Christian Relations; A case study in the field of religious identity*. Unpublished PH.D Thesis. University of Birmingham 1991 : 406.
- ^{xiv} Richard Harvey. *Jesus the Messiah in Messianic Jewish thought*. Mishkan Journal, 2003 Issue 39 :13.
- ^{xv} Dwight Pryor. *One God and Lord*. Mishken Journal, 2003 Issue 39 : 54.
- ^{xvi} Modalism was an Asiatic movement is on the very extreme limit of the doctrine of the Trinity emphasizing the unity of God at the denial of the plurality of God. The one God is substantial, the three differentiations adjectival.
- ^{xvii} - Adoptianism teaches that the "human" Jesus was adopted by the Divine Word and incorporated into the Godhead.

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