

## Romans 9 Debate - Nick's Opening Essay

Romans 9 has been considered one of the most contested sections of all of Scripture. This is principally due to the fact that how one interprets this chapter will undoubtedly impact how one views the subjects of election and Predestination. In this debate, the issue of *corporate* versus *individual* election will be the focus, particularly as it is taught in this chapter.

Simply stated, *corporate* election concerns God's election of groups (i.e. nations, races, tribes, etc), while *individual* election concerns God's election of individual people. Typically, corporate election has temporal objectives in mind (e.g. choosing Israel to usher in the Messiah), while individual election has eternal objectives in mind (i.e. going to Heaven or Hell). **I have taken the affirmative to the debate thesis, holding that Romans 9 is dealing with corporate election**, and I will prove the thesis on two grounds: (1) I will show that Romans 9 is speaking specifically of Jews in opposition to Gentiles, two significant 'corporate bodies', and (2) I will show that even 'corporate terminology' like "nations" is found in the text. This will become especially apparent when examining the *numerous* Old Testament quotations Paul cites in this chapter, which involves more OT references than any other place in the New Testament!

**I want to begin by making the claim that the Jewish 'entitlement' heresy is the fundamental theme of the Book of Romans - and that this heresy was *not* about "working one's way into Heaven through their own efforts,"** popularly (but incorrectly) termed Pelagianism. Rather, the 'entitlement' heresy consisted in the Jews considering themselves *entitled* to salvation and God's favor, seeing themselves as superior *by birth* to the Gentile "sinners" (cf Gal 2:15). **Thus, Paul was fundamentally addressing a 'nationalist-racist' problem in the apostolic Church.** To give a quick overview leading up to Romans 9, consider the following texts: Romans 2:17-27 deals with Jews snubbing their noses at the Gentiles for lacking the Mosaic Law and Circumcision. This continues up through Romans 3:27-30, where Paul brings up the "works of the [Mosaic] Law" and asks the rhetorical question: "*or is God the God of the Jews only?*" - indicating the problem at hand was the Jews claiming a monopoly on God's love and favor. Paul reiterates his "apart from works of the [Mosaic] Law" thesis in Romans 4, by pointing out Abraham was justified *prior to him being circumcised*, and that this was to show the uncircumcised (i.e. Gentiles) also could be acceptable in God's sight (Rom. 4:9-13). In Romans 5:12-14 we see the Mosaic Law came in after the bigger issue, sin and death, had been introduced, indicating the problem and solution was to restore what was *prior to* the existence of the Mosaic Covenant. Romans 6-8 is spent discussing the Christian's new life in Christ, now that the Law's purpose has reached fulfillment and now set aside (Rom. 7:6).

Now we can proceed to analyze Paul's lesson in Romans 9. Paul opens by saying **he is specifically speaking about the Jews as a group** (not individuals in general), and all the blessings and promises *they* were given by God (Romans 9:1-5):

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of **my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites**, and to **them** belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises. To them belong the patriarchs, and from **their race**, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is

God over all, blessed forever. Amen.

Right from the opening verses we see the Jews as a *corporate whole* being spoken of. Paul is introducing his *thesis* by getting to the question of why Israel (as a whole) failed to recognize Jesus as their Messiah, and thus why they're being cast off.

Some of the Jews would argue that being rejected amounts to saying God didn't keep His promises to the Jews, to which Paul responds:

6 But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel **belong to Israel**, 7 and not all are **children of Abraham** because they are his offspring, but "*Through Isaac shall your offspring be named.*" 8 This means that it is **not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise** are counted as offspring. 9 For this is what the promise said: "*About this time next year I will return, and Sarah shall have a son.*" 10 And not only so, but also when Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, 11 though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad - in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls - 12 she was told, "*The older will serve the younger.*" 13 As it is written, "*Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.*"

Many people gloss over this section without understanding what Paul is saying, *but this is at the heart of his thesis*. **Paul's argument is that not everyone born of Abraham's biological lineage is part of the 'promised lineage' of Abraham.** The text uses the term "children of the flesh" and "children of the promise," signifying two important 'corporate bodies'. And as will be shown next, the specific children named here ("Isaac" and "Jacob" and "Esau") turn out to be symbolic references to the *nations* they produced, not the *individuals* themselves.

Consider the first OT quote Paul appeals to, "*Through Isaac shall your offspring be named*" recalls the event of Genesis 21:8-14 where Abraham's **first born biological son Ishmael** and his mother Hagar are told by God that it is through Abraham's **second born biological son Isaac** is to be the **linage** from which would reap the great promises (such as the Messiah). Now ancient custom taught that the first-born was entitled to the greater portion of the inheritance of the father, but this command by God reverses that. (Note that despite Ishmael being sent away and becoming "second class," God goes onto say in Gen 21:13: "I will make **a nation of the son of the slave woman also**, because he is your offspring".) **Clearly, Ishmael and Isaac here personified two distinct nations.** And note how this example had nothing to do with electing Ishmael or Isaac to, e.g., Heaven or Hell, but rather the granting of temporal (earthly) blessings through the 'firstborn' status lineage.

Paul then proceeds to bring up another example, this time it's Abraham's son **Isaac and his wife Rebekah, who became pregnant with twins**. So now the situation is more 'interesting' than the first, since one could argue the legitimacy with the sending away of Hagar. Despite Esau being born first, with Jacob (literally: "he who grabs the heel") coming out right after, God declares "*The older will serve the younger*". This is referencing Genesis 25:21-23, which says:

**"Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you shall be divided; the one**

shall be stronger than the other, *the older shall serve the younger*."

Here we see an explicit reference to "nations," with the two sons representing each. And note that the prophecy that "the older shall serve the younger" was not fulfilled in the lifetimes of Jacob (later renamed "Israel") and Esau, but rather generations later when the Israelites dominated the Edomites (which is the nation formed from Esau's lineage). This is why Paul immediately adds, "*As it is written, 'Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated'*," which is **not** quoting Genesis, **but rather** a time much later in Malachi 1,

2 "I have loved you [Jacob]," says the LORD. But you [Jacob] say, "How have you loved **us**?" "Is not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD. "Yet I have loved Jacob 3 but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert." 4 If **Edom** says, "**We** are shattered but **we** will rebuild the ruins," the LORD of hosts says, "**They** may build, but I will tear down, and **they** will be called 'the wicked country,' and 'the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.'" 5 Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the Lord **beyond the border** of Israel!"

**This confirms a pattern: as with Ishmael and Isaac earlier, so also the context here isn't focused upon individuals, but rather *nations*.** So there is yet another distinction found among Abraham's biological lineage, first Isaac over Ishmael, and now Jacob being chosen over Esau. Of the nations that would emerge, one would be blessed, while the other would be cursed (by living in sin and not having any promises granted to that lineage). Again note that Paul isn't speaking about electing individuals to salvation, but rather remaining on the realm of temporal blessings through certain lineages (signifying nations).

With that in mind, verse 11 - *though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad, in order that God's purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who calls* - is to be taken to mean God freely chooses which means He will bring about His promises, in this case choosing the weaker son, Jacob. This totally refutes the idea God's plans or favor is tied to biology or any superior biological qualities (e.g. good looks, strength, brains). Note that *neither* merits *nor* demerits (i.e. good works or sins) are the condition here, when such things certainly are the condition on whether one is saved or not.

But the natural objection is raised:

14 What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 15 *For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."* 16 So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. 17 *For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth."* 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

Some erroneously interpret this text as saying God decides to have mercy or harden each individual - meaning save or damn them - based solely on His good pleasure and glory. But if one has been following Paul up till now *and* understands these two OT texts, they will see that is *not* what Paul is

getting at. As noted earlier, Paul is framing his argument in terms of one nation versus another, so it is natural to see this theme here also. **In this case, the subject is actually the nation of Israel versus the nation of Egypt, with Moses and Pharaoh signifying the headship of each.** Now let's consider the texts Paul quotes.

First consider what God says to Moses, "*I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.*" This comes from one of the most intimate passages in the Bible, *when God reveals his Glory to Moses* (Ex. 33:12-23). But the *alert reader* will recognize *this comes at the conclusion of one of Israel's most infamous sins, the golden calf* (Ex. 32)! In this passage God says Moses has found favor in His sight precisely because Moses stepped in and interceded for the **Israelite nation** who sinned with the calf and were going to be wiped out and rejected by God. So contrary to a surface level reading, the text is saying God is showing mercy on the Israelite nation at the intercession of their leader, who finds favor in God's sight. This of course prefigures Jesus, and has nothing to do with electing individuals to heaven or hell.

Next consider what God says to Pharaoh, "*For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth,*" during the 7th Plague on Egypt (of 10 total) in Exodus 9:13-17. On *the surface* this could sound as if God desires to see Pharaoh fall and be damned, and so prevents Pharaoh from choosing a different path. But this is a serious misunderstanding. Again, consider that this quote is taken from the 7th Plague, meaning Pharaoh has disobeyed repeatedly leading up to this:

When Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, **he sinned yet again and hardened his heart, he and his servants.** (Ex 9:34)

Here the text explicitly states Pharaoh hardened his own heart, sinning "yet again" (including his servants) just as the Lord foretold. God did this "that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth," meaning God is making the mighty nation of Egypt an object lesson by using the enslaved Israelite nation to defeat them. It was the ultimate showdown between the mighty "firstborn" son/nation from natural means (i.e. Egypt) and God's enslaved "firstborn" son/nation of supernatural selection (Exodus 4:22-23). It is clear from the plagues and the OT as a whole that it was the entire nation of Egypt at odds with the entire nation of Israel, not the individual Pharaoh abstracted from the nation of Egypt. Pharaoh signified headship of the evil nation (Ex 9:27b), which is why the Angel of Death at the Passover will show that God "makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel" (Ex 11:7).

This objection carries into the next few verses:

19 You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" 20 But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? *Will what is molded say to its molder, "Why have you made me like this?"* 21 Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?

As with the prior passages, a surface level reading of this that's not grounded in context will (ironically) end up saying the exact opposite of what Paul really means. Many think Paul is raising the objection, "but how can God damn me for sinning if there was no way for me to avoid the sin in the first place?"

**That's not at all what Paul is saying!** Paul is recalling what he said earlier in Romans, notably **Romans 3:1-8**. Early in Romans, Paul has been teaching the "righteousness" of God is **revealed through the Gospel, particularly through the Jewish rejection and crucifixion of Jesus!** Recall that God's righteousness came *through* the repeated sins of the Jews, most especially in their crucifying of their Messiah. In other words, **God used their sins to actually accomplish His will the whole time!** Satan and the world kept trying to foil God's plans (e.g. thinking if Israel became unfaithful then this would prevent the Messiah from coming), but God was smarter and used these very sins to accomplish Salvation! So the Jew **is thinking**, "if our sins bring about God's righteousness, then if we sin we should actually be getting blessed!" Remember that a sad them in their history is the Jews repeatedly taking advantage of God's mercy, and had fallen into the abominable mindset that St John the Baptist confronted in Matthew 3:7-10. The Jews thought that they simply being "unconditionally" born as children of Abraham that they were "unconditionally" entitled special protection and salvation and blessings from God! But John says, "No!" As does Paul. The Jews thought they could go around not being faithful and not suffer the consequences, but that's downright dangerous thinking. Just because God uses your sin to advance His plan does not mean you will not suffer consequences for your sins!

**This reading explains why Paul follows up with the "Potter" and "Clay" analogy**, not to show God is out to prove He's sovereign by "unconditionally" saving/damning one clay pot over another. Notice that Paul is yet again drawing directly from the OT. **Paul is alluding to at least three OT references to God being the Potter, with Israel specifically (not just anybody!) being the uncooperative clay in his hands**, which would be a huge wake-up call to any Jew listening:

Isaiah 29 13 And the Lord said: "Because **this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me**, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, 14 therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with **this people...** 16 **You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?**

Isaiah 45 9 "Woe to him who strives with him who formed him, a pot among earthen pots! Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?' or 'Your work has no handles'?"

Jeremiah 18 6 "**O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done?**" declares the Lord. **Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel.** 7 If at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, 8 and **if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it.** 9 And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, 10 and **if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it.** 11 Now, therefore, **say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.'**

Now we see a lot more clearly what Paul was getting at this whole time. This has nothing to do with the Potter building a pot just to destroy it, but rather **Israel acting ungratefully and mocking God**, as if God was creature and Israel was the Creator. **In other words, we're dealing with "God's People" living in sin here, not some neutral vessel.** (This certainly has parallels to Paul's comments in 2 Timothy 2:20-22, but that's for another time.)

So what now? Paul has the answer:

22 What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, **has endured with much patience** vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, 23 in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory - 24 even us whom he has called, **not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?** 25 As indeed he says in Hosea, "**Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,' and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved.'**" 26 "And in the very place where it was said to them, '**You are not my people,' there they will be called 'sons of the living God.'**" 27 And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: "**Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved...**"

Here the Jew versus Gentile dichotomy is made explicit, though this was to be understood as building the whole time. **Notice how Paul culminates all that he said prior with "as indeed God says in Hosea," meaning the answer to this was hidden in the OT until now.** What has God been "enduring with much patience"? Paul mentions this earlier in Romans 2:3-5! Paul says God has endured with much "patience" with this Jewish nation of hypocrites, giving them time to repent, and yet they prefer to remain in sin and even reject their own Messiah. Notice how God kept punishing the sinful nations, specifically the 'firstborn' status ones, and how now 'firstborn' Israel is on the chopping block.

Let's now turn to the Hosea quote. The question one should ask themselves is: who are "God's people" referenced here? Obviously, the Jews. So who are "not God's people"? Obviously, the Gentiles. Now notice the 'horrifying' prophecy of Hosea: those who formerly were "not my people" are now going to be called "my people"! Those who don't know the OT cannot understand the force of this prophecy. The *chosen people*, the Jews, would lose their "first born" status to the Gentiles. Which leads right to Romans 9:27, in which Isaiah predicted "concerning Israel" that only a remnant, i.e. the first Christians, would be saved. This is why Paul says that Israel as a nation, though still special to God, was (temporarily) "hardened" (Rom 11:25) and made effectively second class behind the Gentiles. This again confirms the theme of corporate election.

Paul concludes this chapter by driving home this fully revealed Jew versus Gentile theme:

30 What shall we say, then? **That Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith; 31 but that Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed** in reaching that law. 32 Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. **They have stumbled over the stumbling stone,** 33 as it is written, "Behold, I am laying in Zion **a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.**"

As he opened the chapter with pointing out the rejection of the Israelite nation, so Paul closes the chapter on the same note. From start to finish, the theme is that of the 'firstborn' Jews versus 'second born' Gentiles. The Jews failed to recognize the "Stone" of Zion, Jesus, and when they tried to do away with Jesus, they tripped and fell. On the other hand, the lost pagan Gentiles continued to recognize Jesus as Savior and believed in him, until they became the super-majority in the Church, which is the 'corporate body' of Christ.

To conclude, I have quoted almost the entire chapter of Romans 9 and commented upon virtually every major detail, particularly the OT references. I have shown how corporate election is clearly the theme, and indeed the only theme. The only possible way I can see Miguel try to counter my argument is to claim that the people named in this chapter signify individuals, rather than nations. But as I showed repeatedly, time and again these persons were clearly personifications of nations. Any attempt to get around this will only do violence to the text **as a whole**, since one will either see and embrace the **unified theme from start to finish** of Romans 9 or else they'll fall prey to cherry picking verses and ignoring the context.