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Our eternally righteous God: Paul's great controversy theme in Romans 11

Luther's study of Romans provided the dramatic insight that salvation comes through faith in Christ alone, and not through any good deeds humans perform. Recent studies have given rise to further opinions about the central theme (righteousness by faith) of the epistle. The "new perspective,"¹ resulting from the study of intertestamental Jewish literature, suggests Jews understood the gracious nature of salvation, and their laws were simply their part of the covenant God made with them. Their problem was the exclusive ethnocentricity that effectively blocked Paul's mission to the Gentiles. Another perspective, which is gaining acceptance, considers Paul's focus as apocalyptic—the revelation and triumph of God's righteousness²—what Adventists have understood as the central motif of Scripture, "the great controversy."

The old perspective

Many Christians today read Paul's epistles primarily from Luther's "old perspective," so an appraisal of these other perspectives would be valuable. For starters, we must understand the importance of recognizing that Paul wrote with profound knowledge of Jewish Scripture, particularly its narrative qualities.³ Recent scholarship has recognized that the New Testament should not be isolated from the Old,⁴ narrative

is crucial to any worldview, and the Old Testament narrative forms the framework of Romans.⁵ Others plead for Christians to acknowledge the Bible as one story.⁶

Paul often used narrative. He frequently told his own conversion story (Acts 22:3–21; 26:4–18; Gal. 1:13–17), used personal narrative to build his argument to the Galatians (Gal. 1:18–2:14), and indicates narrative when he writes, "You foolish Galatians! . . . It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!" (Gal. 3:1, NRSV). His doctrine of the Resurrection was based on narrative (1 Cor. 15:3–8) and, most famously, he used the narrative of Abraham, Hagar, and Sarah to build his doctrine of salvation by grace (Rom. 4; Gal. 3:6–9; 4). Finally, Paul states clearly in the first two verses of his epistle to the Romans that "the gospel of God . . . [was] promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures" (Rom. 1:1, 2, NRSV), indicating the foundation of his teaching.

Koch states there are 89 Old Testament quotations in the Pauline letters, 51 occur in Romans.⁷ The density of scriptural quotation increases in Romans 9–11, where some theologians believe Paul reaches the climax of his argument that God's dealings with Israel are consistent with the way He has always worked.⁸ For centuries, Paul has been seen as the champion of

a new way of salvation in Christ, as opposed to an obsolete way of striving through obedience to the law. But what does Paul really emphasize?

Paul and the people of Israel

In Romans 11, Paul's first proof that God has not rejected His people, Israel, is that Paul himself is an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin. This simple statement alludes to two narratives: Paul's own dramatic conversion story, which he was very fond of telling (Paul, once so destructive towards the followers of Jesus, has not been rejected), and that of the tribe of Benjamin—the son born by grace to a dying mother (Gen. 35:16–19), the recipient of special graces from his brother Joseph (Gen. 43:8, 9, 16–34; 45:14–20)—saved from Egypt, and finally part of a remnant returned from the Babylonian exile (Ezra 10:9).

Paul repeats that God has not rejected His people. Many times Israel appeared close to rejection. They had barely become a nation when God threatened their destruction because they worshiped the golden calf. Moses pleaded their case, offering his own rejection (Exod. 32:9, 10, 31–34). God's reply is pertinent: "Whoever has sinned against me, him will I blot out of my book" (v. 33).⁹ Moses remade the stone tablets, and God repeated

His covenant with explicit words of grace (Exod. 34:1, 5–7, 10–12). On the very borders of the Promised Land, Israel rebelled, fearing the military might of Canaan (Num. 13:25–14:10). Again God threatened to disinherit them (Num. 14:11, 12), and Moses pleaded for them, on the basis of the covenant of grace made after the golden calf episode (Num. 14:13–21).

As Paul thought of Israel, a long parade of narratives suggested they were always on the verge of rejection. A common thread runs through all these near-rejection events: it was *always* the people who turned from God, not God from the people. But in Romans 11:2–5, Paul chose to zero in on one of the most blatant of these episodes: when Israel was a prosperous nation, settled into the Promised Land, under no military threat or difficulty, during the time of Ahab and Elijah. Frustrated and discouraged, Elijah complains to God against them. Did Paul sense a similarity between Elijah’s and his

own situation? Paul focuses, however, not on the failure of Israel but on God’s revelation of the still-faithful remnant. Did Paul focus on Elijah’s situation because he was thinking of Elijah’s coming before the day of the Lord?

Paul thus rapidly establishes, through scriptural narrative, that God does not abandon His people: a remnant will be saved by grace, and God will be vindicated (Rom. 11:5). Verse 6 repeats this thought. The verse echoes Isaiah 11:11, the promise of God saving the remnant of His people. Paul loved the book of Isaiah, quoting from it more than from any other Old Testament book.¹⁰ Isaiah 11 narrates the coming righteous Branch of Jesse and the future new earth, where barriers will be removed from between all former enemies: wolves lie with lambs, toddlers with adders (and by inference, Jews with Gentiles). In just a few words, Paul alludes to both the coming Messiah and the dreamed restoration of Israel. In verses 5 and 6 of Romans

11, he sums up this whole wonderful situation: restoration comes entirely by grace. Israel’s repeated failure to be true to God can be remedied only by God’s amazing grace.

Thus, the first six verses of Romans 11 present the old perspective—Paul’s teaching that human beings are saved individually by grace alone. They also suggest the first premise of the new perspective, that Jews also understood this grace. However, there are hints in the Elijah message and the new world to come that Paul sees beyond human issues.

The blindness of Jews and Gentiles

Romans 11:7–15 presents a complex argument that Israel has been blinded (or hardened) and made jealous so that Gentiles can come in. Modern scholarship favors the idea of the word being “hardened” not “blinded” (v. 7), but the scriptures Paul quotes in verses 8–10 (Deut. 29:4; Isa. 29:10; Ps. 69:22, 23) refer to blindness: “ ‘God gave them

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... eyes that should not see.' . . . '[L]et their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see.' " Is Paul alluding to a story here? Between the verses quoted from the Elijah story (1 Kings 19:10, 18) are verses commanding Elijah to anoint a new king over Syria (God's involvement with Gentiles), a new king over northern Israel (God's involvement with Israel), and a new prophet (Elisha, who will reveal God's ways).

What narrative connects these events, showing blinded people sitting down to a table that is a snare and trap, as quoted in Psalm 69:22, 23? He alludes to the narrative of 2 Kings 6:8–23: Elisha's terrified servant wakes to discover Syrian soldiers surrounding his city, Dothan. Elisha prays that his servant's eyes will be opened to see the protective horses and chariots of fire around the enemy and for the Syrian army to be blinded. Elisha then calmly goes to the armed, but blinded Syrians, says they are in the wrong place, and leads them into the heart of Samaria!

There their eyes are opened to their dire predicament. The king of Israel, blind to spiritual opportunity, eagerly asks, " 'Shall I slay them?' " (v. 21). No, says Elisha, give them food and water to drink. Now the king "sees," and prepares a great feast for his "guests," who afterward simply go away (v. 23).

This narrative captures the blindness of *all* concerned—the Jews to the power of God and their calling to bless the nations and the Gentiles to the benefits the Jews offer. This blindness serves to demonstrate that everyone needs God's saving grace, Jew and Gentile equally. Paul concludes, "[I]f their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?" (Rom. 11:15). The narrative beautifully endorses both the old perspective of salvation by grace alone and the inclusion of the Gentiles as envisioned by the new perspective. However, in the narrative, the barriers broken down are not simply those of national

identity but of attitude. This occurs by the *revelation* of God's power and character to Elisha, to his servant, to the king of Israel, and to the Syrians; that is, to everyone.

The olive-tree analogy

Paul now develops the idea of broken pieces (remnants) being made a viable whole, and embarks on the best-known passage in the chapter—his exposition of oleiculture. The more unusual aspects of Paul's parable may not be as fanciful as sometimes supposed.¹¹ While the norm in cultivating olive trees was to graft cultivated scions to wild olive roots, sometimes trees that stopped fruiting could be shocked back into productivity by grafting a wild shoot into a cultivated branch.

However, in the olive motif, Paul, no doubt, alludes to Jeremiah 11 and perhaps echoes the narrative of the olive branch as a sign of safety for the remnant saved from the Flood (Gen. 8:10, 11). Jeremiah 11:16 reads, " 'The LORD once called you,

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"A green olive tree, fair with goodly fruit," " " but now He threatens them with destruction. Jeremiah 11 reflects Paul's earlier concern about Israel's rejection from the covenant God made with Israel, which they have broken time and again: " 'I solemnly warned your fathers . . . warning them persistently. . . . Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but every one walked in the stubbornness of his evil heart. Therefore I brought upon them all the words of this covenant' " (vv. 7, 8).

What pain does Paul feel when he reads Jeremiah 11:14: " 'Therefore do not pray for this people, or lift up a cry or prayer on their behalf, for I will not listen when they call to me in the time of their trouble' " " ? We hear the same pain in God's heart when He says, " 'What right has my beloved in my house' " (v. 15). Ah, the story has become that of a spurned lover. We hear the echoes and pathos of Hosea's narrative: "I will heal their faithlessness; / I will love them freely. . . . Israel . . . shall blossom as the lily . . . his beauty shall be like the olive" (Hosea 14:4-6).

Jeremiah wrote more in chapter 11. The echo in verse 19 is unmistakable: "But I was like a gentle lamb / led to the slaughter. / I did not know it was against me / they devised their schemes, saying, / 'Let us destroy the tree with its fruit, / let us cut him off from the land of the living, / that his name be remembered no more.' " While Paul poetically pleads for Israel to remain or be grafted back to the olive tree, he shows to any educated Jew that the tree, and the spurned lover, is none other than the Suffering Messiah.

The passage is thus rich in imagery and narrative that confirms the old-perspective emphasis on grace and the new-perspective recognition of the need for all to be included as recipients of this grace. But Paul has focused far beyond the needs of humanity to the perspective of the faithful Lover: God spurned by those who will not keep (obey) His covenant.

The wisdom of God

In words of warning lest the Gentiles be conceited about their new relationship with God and compared with the blindness of the Jews, Paul reminds them that he is dealing with a mystery. Quoting somewhat loosely from Psalm 14:7 (longing for a Deliverer), Isaiah 59:20, 21 (the Redeemer will come to those turning from transgression), Isaiah 27:9 (remove sin), and Jeremiah 31:33 (the new covenant), Paul reminds us that the covenantal promises were first made with Israel. However, he rephrases these quotations: " 'This will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins' " (Rom. 11:27). These words allude to distinctive Christian narrative: John saw Jesus and said, " 'Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!' " (John 1:29). Not merely Jewish sin needs removal, but the sin of the whole world, and *this* is the covenant God has made with His people.


As Paul contemplates all that God must accomplish for His goal, he bursts into praise. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33). His final quotes are a tour de force. " 'Who has known the mind of the Lord, / or who has been his counselor?' " comes from the richly Messianic and powerfully God-revealing Isaiah 40, bristling with echoes: "Speak tenderly to Jerusalem . . . her warfare is ended, / that her iniquity is pardoned. . . . A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD.' " "He will feed his flock like a shepherd." "The LORD is the everlasting God, / the Creator of the ends of the earth. / He does not faint or grow weary." "[T]hey who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:2, 3, 11, 28, 31).

Romans 11:35, quoted from Job 41:11, " 'Who has given a gift to him / that he might be repaid?' " shows that God owes nothing. But

the power of the quote lies in the echoes of the narrative. The Job narrative draws aside the curtain of mere human need, showing the vast celestial struggle between the powers of good and evil. Job did not understand his predicament; Paul does not understand the predicament of the Jews. But, in Job's story, Paul sees a vision of the future triumph of God and the restoration of His people.

Conclusion

Thus Paul weaves a rich, multihued tapestry of Old Testament narrative that clearly shows he moves from the old perspective of individual salvation by grace to the new perspective of Gentile inclusion, to the apocalyptic perspective that God will save His people from sin, and will finally be vindicated when He renews all things.

Paul's focus is therefore profoundly apocalyptic and classic Seventh-day Adventist theology—the great controversy between God and evil is completely in accord with him. The old and new perspectives simply guide our mission to the world. 

1. E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM Press, 1977). This was a pivotal study that initiated the development of the concepts of the new perspective.
2. See J. C. Becker, *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1980), 92n.
3. See especially Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1989).
4. Francis Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 13. Watson is an "old perspective" proponent.
5. N. T. Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," in *Romans*, eds. David Hays and E. Johnson, vol. 3 of *Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 31, 32. N. T. Wright is a "new perspective" proponent.
6. Michael W. Goheen, "The Urgency of Reading the Bible as One Story," *Theology Today* 64 (2008): 469.
7. Dietrich-Alex Koch, *Die Schrift als Zeuge des Evangeliums: Untersuchungen zur Verwendung und zum Verständnis der Schrift bei Paulus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1986), 21-41, quoted in Hays, *Echoes*, 34.
8. Hays, *Echoes*, 64.
9. All scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are quoted from the Revised Standard Version.
10. Hays, *Echoes*, 162. Paul uses 28 quotes from Isaiah, 20 from Psalms, 15 from Deuteronomy, 15 from Genesis, and no other book more than 5 times.
11. Philip Francis Esler, "Ancient Oleiculture and Ethnic Differentiation: The Meaning of the Olive-Tree Image in Romans 11," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 26, no. 1 (2003): 111-118.

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