



## A Critical Examination of Paul's Use of Old Testament in Romans 9:23-29: Its Implications for the Contemporary Churches in Nigeria

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### 1. PREAMBLE

According to Fleming (1988:499) "The opponents of God may argue that God is unjust to save some and harden others. Paul replies sharply by asking who do people imagine themselves to be if they think they can argue with God? God is not answerable to the human beings he created." A potter does not have to tell a lump of clay why he decides to make it into either a beautiful bowl or a common pot (Rom. 9: 19-21). Paul has made it clear that God's saving promises have been fulfilled for the Gentiles. Indeed, the church of Jesus Christ now enjoys the spiritual blessings promised to Israel: the gift of the Spirit (8:9); adoption as God's children (8: 14-17); future glory (8: 17, 30); election (8:33); and the promise of never being severed from God's love (8: 35-39). Paul now ask in chapters 9-11 whether the promises God made to ethnic Israel will be fulfilled. If his promises to the Jews remain unfulfilled, how can Gentile Christians be sure that he will fulfill the great promises that conclude chapter 8? Paul answers that God is faithful to his saving promises to Israel (9:6) and that he will ultimately save his people (11: 26), The Holy Bible (2007: 2172).

Stott (1994: 263) stress in Romans chapter 9, this study sees how Paul identifies himself with the people of Israel and expresses his profound concern for them. To him Israel's unbelief is far more than an intellectual problem. He writes of the sorrow and anguish he feels over them (9: 1ff), of his prayerful longing for their salvation (10: 1), and of his conviction that God has not rejected them (11: 1f). The argument of chapter 9 is sump up as follows. Paul begins by confessing that Jewish unbelief causes him not only anguish of heart (vv. 1-3), but also perplexity of mind as he asks himself how the people of Israel with their eight unique privileges could have rejected their own Messiah (vv. 4-5). How can their apostasy be explained? Paul's questions and answers proceed consecutively.

First, is it that God's word has failed (v.6a)? No, God has kept his promise, which was addressed, however, not to all Israel but to true, spiritual Israel (v. 6b) whom he had called according to his own 'purpose in election' (vs. 11-12). Secondly, is God not unjust to exercise his Sovereign choices (v. 14)? No. To Moses he stressed his mercy (v. 15), and to Pharaoh his power in judgment (v. 17). But it is not unjust either to show mercy to the undeserving or to harden those who harden themselves (v. 18). Both mercy and judgment are fully compatible with justice. Thirdly, why then does God still blame us? (v. 19).

Paul's threefold response to this question uncovers the misunderstandings of God which it implies. (a) God has the right of a potter to shape his clay, and we have no right to challenge him (vs. 20-21). (b) God must reveal himself as he is, making known his wrath and his glory (vs. 22-23). (c) God has foretold in Scripture both the inclusion of the Gentiles and the exclusion of Israel except for a remnant (vs.24-29). Fourthly, what then shall we say in conclusion (v.30)? The explanation of the church's composition (a Gentile majority and a Jewish remnant) is that the Gentiles believed in Jesus whereas the majority of Israel stumbled over him, the stone God had laid (vs. 30-33). Thus the acceptance of the Gentiles is attributed to the sovereign mercy of God, and the rejection of Israel to their own rebellion, Stott (1994: 263-264).

## **2. A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF PAUL'S USE OF OLD TESTAMENT IN ROMANS 9: 23-29**

Luck (1955:186) has simply explain the nature of the text, "Romans 9 is about God's mercy shown to Israel on the basis of his covenant and sovereignty." Mock (1989:96) further explain, Paul believe that since salvation comes by faith alone-not by being born a Jew or keeping the law-where does this leave Israel in God's redemptive plan? The simple answer is in mercy, God selected Israel as His chosen instrument by whom He would accomplish His redemptive plan and purpose through Jesus Christ. But since Israel rejected Christ as their Messiah (Savior) and King, God temporarily rejected Israel as His chosen instrument. Instead, God since the death of Christ has been accomplishing His redemptive plan through the Church. And yet God has not completely rejected Israel for when God's plan through the Church is completed and the full number of Gentiles has been saved, God will once again use Israel as His chosen instrument of redemption to accomplish His purpose.

Henry (1987:859) added, God formed vessels filled with mercy. Sanctification is the preparation of the soul for glory. Would we know who these vessels of mercy are? Those whom God has called; and these not of the Jews only, but of the Gentiles. Surely there can be no unrighteousness in any of these Divine dispensations. Nor in God's exercising long-suffering, patience, and forbearance towards sinners under increasing guilt, before he brings utter destruction upon them. It is the Lord alone who made us to suffer; we should adore his pardoning mercy and new-creating grace, and give diligence to make our calling and election sure. But Willmington 1984:460) narrates that, "The vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory (9:23). The conclusion of the matter is that hell (destruction) is the deserved destination of the sinful man, while heaven (glory) is the undeserved destination of the saved man."

Barker & Kohlenberger III (1994:572) alludes, in Romans 9:22 the crucial problem is the correct interpretation of "prepared for destruction." The question is, is Paul teaching a double predestination, that is, that God chooses some people to experience his mercy and others to experience his wrath? This is improbable, because he avoids involving God in this case, whereas God is involved in showing mercy to the objects of his mercy (v. 23). Furthermore, God's patience in bearing with the objects of his wrath suggests a readiness to receive such people on condition of repentance (cf. 2: 3-4; 2 Pet. 3:9). Barker & Kohlenberger III (1994:572) stress, so "Prepared for destruction" designates a ripeness of sinfulness that points to judgment unless such people turn to God, yet God is not made responsible for their sinful condition. The preparation for destruction is the work of human beings, who allow themselves to deteriorate in spite of knowledge and conscience.

Barker & Kohlenberger III (1994:1408-1409) notes, Presumably, and in view of what follows, when Paul speaks of 'the objects of his (God's) wrath (v. 22), he is thinking of those in Israel who have remained obdurate in opposing the Gospel, yet are still the objects of the divine longsuffering. In contrast to them are "the objects of his mercy" (v. 23) in which God wills to show the riches of his glory. These include both Jews and Gentiles (v.24), in line with the previous teaching (1: 16; 2:10-11; 3:22 and with the prophetic announcement. Through the prophet Hosea God declared his freedom to call others to be his people (v. 25). In Hosea 1:10, it was observed that, in his day God was disclaiming the Israelites as the people, in a day to come God would make their number "like the sand on the seashore." God would carry out his promise to Abraham (Gen. 22: 17) despite the unfaithfulness of the people (cf. Rom. 9: 26). Barker & Kohlenberger III (1994:572) believe strictly, "this passage from Hosea 2:23 refers to the reversal in Israel's status from being called 'not my people' (Hosea 1:9) to being restored, but both Romans 9: 25 and 1 Peter 2: 10 apply it to include Gentiles." Today, the Gentiles, who are not actually a people but masses of humanity as described by the Jews, are called by the grace of God to a distinctive role-that of being the people of God. This was happening in Paul's day.

Fleming (1988:339) narrates, Hosea had three children, all of whom were given names with symbolic meaning. The first foretold judgment on the dynasty of Jehu, to which Jeroboam II belonged. God's appointment of Jehu as King was for the purpose of destroying the wicked family of Ahab and Jezebel, but Jehu used it as an opportunity to satisfy his ambition for absolute power. He treacherously destroyed all opponents in a series of brutal massacres, but now the dynasty he established will come to an end (Hosea 1:4-5; cp. 2 Kings 9:6-10; 10: 1-27). Fleming (1988:339-340) further explain that, the name of the second child foretold that God will no longer have pity on the

northern kingdom, but will allow it to suffer the full penalty of its sins. However, he will not yet withdraw his mercy from Judah, but will protect it by his miraculous power (Hosea 1: 6-7; cf. 2 Kings 19: 21-37). By the time the third child was born, God no longer recognized Israel as his people. The nation (and, later, Judah as well) will be cut off from him and taken into captivity (Hosea 1:8-9). Despite these judgments, God will have pity on Israel and Judah; they will once more become his people. In Jezreel, where God's judgment fell, they will rejoice again. Israel and Judah will be brought back to their homeland and reunited as one people (Hosea 1: 10-2:1).

Elwell (ed.) (2008:605-606) explain why some names were given. It was a customary practice among the Hebrews to give their children names bearing special meanings. A name could express affirmation of faith in God, parental hope concerning a child, or a trait of a baby. In Hosea's family each name is given by the Lord to bear a divine message. The first boy's name, Jezreel, literally means "God sows" but has geographical and historical significance as well. The boy's name symbolizes God's punishment for Jehu's sin. The second son's name, Lo-Ammi, means "not my people" and declares to Israel that her relationship as the Lord's people has come to an end. No longer would they participate in the covenant made at Mount Sinai, except for the mercy of God. Yet in spite of Israel's sin, that mercy is still available and the possibility for a renewal of the relationship exists. As terrible as the day of Jezreel would be, the people of the two kingdoms could be reunited and ruled by one leader.

Barker & Kohlenberger III (1994:572-573), again, the same quotation from Hosea 1:10 (omitting the first half of the verse, which refers to the prophesied increase in the number of the people of Israel). Here too the background is the Lo-Ammi prophecy of Hosea 1:9, which is seen to be revoked when Israel will once again be called "sons of the living God." In light of Peter's use of Hosea 2:23 to apply to Gentiles (1 Peter 2:10), Paul's intimation of a similar application would be understandable. It is just possible, however, that he does not intend Hosea 1:10 to apply to Gentiles but rather to Jews, in which case he may be giving a hint of something developed in chapter 11-the influx of Gentiles during Israel's temporary rejection, followed by the turning of Israel to the Lord in great numbers (11: 25-27). More insight to Hosea 2: 23, we see that Israel (i.e. Jezreel), planted bountifully, will bring forth a large population (cf. 1:10-11). In contrast to Hosea's time, when the names "not loved" (Lo-Ruhamah) and "not my people" (Lo-Ammi) were appropriate (1: 6-8), the future day will find the opposite true. Love will be shown toward "Not my loved one," and "Not my people" will be called "You are my people" (cf. Rom. 9:25).

Barker & Kohlenberger III(1994:1411) states "The Israelites, in turn, will respond, "You are my God." Thus vv. 22-23 gives response to all three of Gomer's children." In *The Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible: Volume 2* (2000:520) notes that God is willing to suffer (tolerate, put up with, endure) evil men for a long time. Why? Why does God not go ahead and do away with evil and with evil men? There is one very powerful reason: God is fulfilling His purpose in the world. The purpose is demonstrated in the following areas. First, God is making known the riches of His glory upon believers, the subjects of mercy. Second, God is preparing still others for glory (cp. 2 Pet. 3:9). Third, the ones being prepared for glory include both Jews and Gentiles. (Note how even this fact points toward God showing no partiality toward any people or person, Jew or Gentile. God does not pick some for sin and hell and some for righteousness and heaven.

Still in *The Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible: Volume 2* (2000:521), Prophet Hosea said three things about the Gentiles (Rom.9: 24-29). First, The Gentiles will be called "God's people." They are the very ones who were not called God's people (cp. Hosea 2:23). Second, The Gentiles will be called "My loved one." They are the very ones who were not called "My loved one" (cp. Hosea 2:23). Third, They Gentiles were in a place where it was said that they were not God's people. The Gentiles were in the very place where they were to be called the children of God (cp. Hosea 1:10). Willmington (1984:460) assert as saying, "Hosea predicted that God would call out a 'people who were not my people' (Rom. 9: 25; cp. Hosea 1:10; 2:23). Here God's sovereignty is seen in reference to the saved Gentiles (1 Pet. 2: 9, 10). Again we see the example of Isaiah (Rom. 9: 27-29). He predicted, 'Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, a remnant shall be saved' (Rom. 9:27; see also Isaiah 1:9). Here God's sovereignty is seen in reference to the saved Israelites remnant."

According to Bruce (ed.) (1986:1334-1335), this is prophecy come true. In Romans 9:25f. Paul cites Hosea 2:23; 1: 10 as adumbrations that the church, the elect instrument of God's purposes, would

largely be made up of Gentiles. The Old Testament Reveals God's plan that the Gentiles were to become His people, His loved one, and His sons. Cf. Psalm 87; Isaiah 19:25. Place means for Paul the whole Gentile world (Rom. 9: 27-29). Church (ed.) (1992:587) "Former badness of the Gentiles is no hindrance to God's present grace and mercy to save the Gentiles." Stott (1994:273) added his voice as saying, among the objects of God's mercy, whom he has prepared in advance for glory (Rom. 9:23), Paul now includes even us, himself and his readers, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles (Rom. 9:24). In Rom. 9:25-26 Paul quotes two texts from Hosea, to explain God's amazing inclusion of the Gentiles, and then in verses 27-29 two texts from Isaiah, to explain his equally amazing reduction of Jewish inclusion to a remnant.

Finally, Barker & Kohlenberger III (1994:573) notes looking at Romans 9: 27-29, we would see how Paul used scripture to show that God's purpose is to extend his mercy to Gentiles, so now he uses Scripture again to make clear that the election of Israel does not preclude her reduction through chastening judgment; yet in the sparing of the remnant his mercy and faithfulness are to be seen. Both passages quoted here are from Isaiah. The former anticipates the depletion of the nation by reason of the Assyrian invasion under Sennacherib. Without softening his decree and without delay, God would permit the judgment to fall; Jacob would be reduced to a remnant (Isaiah 10:22). The remainder of the sentence, however, underscores the divine mercy—"the remnant will be saved." The Hebrew text has "will return" (i.e., after deportation).

Barker & Kohlenberger III (1994:573) affirms that, Paul sees the promises of a greater deliverance, for he says, "will be saved." Even as he wrote, there was a remnant of Israel found in the church. In view of the nation's rejection of Jesus as Israel's Messiah, Messianic Jews should be grateful for the minority of Jews who have embraced the Gospel of Christ (Paul returns to this theme in Romans 11:5). If God's judgment had been unsparing, the nation would have become as truly wiped out as Sodom and Gomorrah (Romans 9:29). But the divine judgment is tempered by unflinching mercy, of which the remnant is the eloquent proof. Elwell (ed.) (2008:945) stress, "Accordingly, the major theme of Romans 9 is the mercy of God and the riches of his glory toward Israel and the Gentiles."

### **3. THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE USE OF OLD TESTAMENT IN ROMANS 9: 23-29 FOR OUR CONTEMPORARY CHURCHES IN NIGERIA**

Elwell (ed.) (2008:945) expresses a concern that why and how God does what he does lie in the realm of mystery, and Paul does not give any philosophical explanations; he only defends God's right to be merciful in his own sovereign way and at his own time. Nor does he attempt to describe how God can be sovereignly absolute while he justly holds his creatures responsible, but such is the case and Paul concurs with the biblical tradition that both go together in mysterious merismus. There is not the slightest hint in Paul of limiting God's power to underwrite human freedom, as in liberal and process forms of theology, nor does Paul even speak of genuine freedom except in Christ; but of human responsibility he says a great deal. He is about to turn from his theological explanations of why his people Israel have rejected Christ (God is patiently working out his sovereign plan of mercy through election (Rom. 9:1-29), and now takes up the complementary issue in God's plan of salvation that concerns human responsibility and response to the Gospel.

It is observed in *The Holy Bible (ESV)* (2007:2174-2175) that God created a world in which both his wrath and his mercy would be displayed. Indeed, his mercy shines against the backdrop of his just wrath, showing thereby that the salvation of any person is due to the marvelous grace and love of God. If this is difficult to understand, it is because people mistakenly think God owes them salvation. In his grace and mercy God has called people to himself from both the Jews and the Gentiles. This is why Paul quotes Hosea 2: 23 and 1:10 to illustrate the stunning grace of God—that those who are not my people . . . will be called "sons of the living God." In calling the Gentiles to salvation, God calls a sinful people to himself; just as in saving Israel he showed mercy to undeserving. No one can presume on God's grace. In calling anyone to salvation, he shows undeserved mercy to those who were not his people. The fact that only some of Israel would be saved was prophesied in Isaiah 10: 22-23. Most of Israel was judged, and only a remnant experienced salvation. Indeed, as Isaiah 1: 9 says, Israel deserved to be wiped out like Sodom and Gomorrah, but God had mercy and spared some.



Therefore, as referred in the Old Testament, the objects of wrath or judgment are “prepared” for destruction, but the objects of mercy are “prepared in advance” for glory. The agent that “prepared” the objects for wrath is not identified. Scripture simply says that they are “prepared” for destruction. This allows the interpretation that they “prepared” or “fitted” themselves for destruction; whereas God is said to prepare the objects of mercy for glory. Now the challenge, if God actually created men to be sinful so that He could condemn them to wrath, He would not be righteous and just. Even in our finite world, to make something evil is considered unrighteous and unjust. How much more is this so in the infinite world of heaven? God does not prepare men for destruction; men prepare themselves for destruction. The whole world is sinful and depraved. “There is no one righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10). “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23; 10: 9-18).

God knows the heart of every man, even before he is born (Jeremiah 1:5; 17:9). He even knows who will be saved and who will not be saved. The question then, why, then, does he not stop the world instead of letting it go on, when he knows some men are going to doom themselves? There is one primary reason: if God stopped the world then there would be; first, no more objects of mercy, no more believers. Second, no more believers to be brought and offered as brothers and sisters to Christ (Rom. 8: 29). Third, no more people upon whom God could demonstrate his glorious mercy and love (Rom. 9: 23; Eph. 2: 7). God is willing to put up with evil men in order to shower “the riches of his glory” upon those who believe on his Son (Rom. 9: 23, 33).

In *The Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible: Volume 2 (Acts-Colossians)*(2000: 520-521) here we see that there is nothing inconsistent with God showing mercy to some while condemning others. God punishes the wicked only for their sins. The Bible proves beyond doubt that all men are sinful. None deserve mercy. No man deserves to be chosen by God for anything (Rom. 9: 10-13). All men stand under the wrath of God. Therefore, there are no injustices done to a wicked man if God chooses to show mercy to another. The object of mercy will fall upon his face in utter adoration and praise, and he will become a willing servant, willingly owned and possessed by his Savior (Rom. 9:22-23; 11: 33-36).

Still in *The Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible: Volume 2 (Acts-Colossians)* (2000:521)another point brought out in Romans 9:23-24 is this: the “riches of God's glory” are more clearly seen in the lives of the chosen because of the wickedness of all others. The highest good is said to be accomplished in both the wicked and the chosen objects. The glory of God's love is much more clearly seen by the contrast of a fallen and depraved universe. The conclusion drawn in Romans 9:25-29. Paul's point is to give weight to this fact: God has judged the rejection of Israel as a nation by choosing persons from Gentiles nations as well. God's people are persons from all nations who pursue His righteousness as found in Christ. Therefore, “anyone who trusts in him (Christ) will never be put to shame” (Rom. 10:11). Field & Alexander (ed.) (1983:585)stress “It is only by virtue of his patience and mercy that even a remnant of stubborn, rebellious Israel survived his judgment (Rom. 9:22-29).”

According to Adeyemo (ed.) (2006:1366);

God is absolutely sovereign. We are related to him as his children solely by his grace. But his sovereignty does not exclude human responsibility. We cannot excuse ourselves and blame God. We are guilty whenever we resist God and his calling in our lives. Because God is sovereign in his election, he is free to call both Jews and Gentiles to become his people. Paul supports this argument with quotations from Hosea 2:23 and then Hosea 1:10 to show that those who were not God's people have become his people by his sovereign decision (Rom. 9: 24-26). God always selects a group for himself, a remnant out of a great number (Rom. 9: 27-29; cp. Isaiah 10: 22-23; 1:9). God's words to Israel now apply to both Gentiles and Jews. Under the old covenant, the Gentiles were not accepted as people of God, but now that has changed.

Believers all over the world are among the objects of God's mercy. We are his people, his children, from all the tribes and nations of Africa. God has called us to be special people belonging to him. God has called us not because of whom we are but because of who he is-the sovereign God. We have no right to be proud and arrogant. Our salvation is none of our own doing; it is all by the divine will of God.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

This study has observed that the entire Romans 9 highlights about sovereignty of God. The researcher saw Paul writing in harmony with the Old Testament view of the complementary relationship of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, alternating between them, focusing now on one, now on the other (this is technically called biblical merismus, from Greek meros, a part here, a part there; Old Testament examples are Exod. 7:3-4; 8: 15; cp. Isaiah 45: 9-13; 55: 1-7; Ezekiel 5: 1-17; 18: 1-32). Elwell (ed.) (2008:943) affirms that, "in spite of the fact that Paul is in anguish over his people's failure to accept Christ and gives evidence of his sense of disposability in his willingness to be 'cursed and cut off' for their sake (Rom. 9: 2-3); knowing the impossibility of this request but expressing his compassion and sorrow in the most extreme terms), he nonetheless defends God's plan of redemption and timing as he is sovereignly working it out ("It is not as though God's word had failed" (Rom. 9:6a)."

Elwell (ed.) (2008:944) observe, "the apparent contradiction is that 'my own race, the people of Israel' can claim a great heritage; here Paul gives a formidable list of advantages, including 'adoption as sons,' covenants, promises, and almost of all (ironically, the sore point)." It is interesting to note that; God's wrath, power, and patience concerning 'the objects of his wrath-prepared for destruction' but God's sovereign grace was turned toward 'the objects of his mercy'. This was demonstrated to both the Jews and the Gentiles, whom he prepared in advance in glory-even us that were not included. Elwell (ed.) (2008:943) further states, "Thus Paul expresses that God works mysteriously, 'roundly,' and wonderfully on behalf of many who formerly were objects of his wrath (the Gentiles and reprobate Israel) but repented and by faith opened themselves to his grace."

Elwell (ed.) (2008:943) added, "thus 'prepared for destruction' does not necessarily imply an eternal reprobation, for many of 'the objects of his wrath' whom he 'bore with great patience' are in the new eschatological age that is inaugurated by the grace of Christ the very 'objects of his mercy' to whom he makes 'the riches of his glory known, 'even us,' says Paul, 'whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles.'" Hence Hosea's prophecy can be cited as brought to fulfillment in this age, for not my people become my people, the former objects of wrath have now become by the 'great patience' of God the objects of his mercy.

Dake (2001:293) believe that if men will accept mercy God will give it to them. If they will not, thus be hardening them he is only just and righteous in judging them. Men are privileged to humble themselves and seek mercy or exalt themselves and refuse mercy. "It is observed that mercy is the effect of a right attitude, and hardening is the effect of stubbornness or the wrong attitude toward God. It is like the clay and the wax in the sun. Men are more responsible than these materials, for they have wills to make proper choices." Finally, Stott (1994:271) stress that, returning to Romans, Paul is not wishing to stifle genuine questions. After all, he has been asking and answering questions throughout the chapter and indeed the whole letter. No, "it is the God-defying rebel and not the bewildered seeker after the truth whose mouth Paul so peremptorily shuts". Paul's emphasis is that as the potter has the right to sharp his clay into vessels for different purposes, so God has the right to deal with fallen humanity according to both his wrath and his mercy, as he has argued in Romans 9: 10-18).

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