

## "LITERARY CONTEXT"

(Romans 9:1-11:36)

(Frank Theilman)

There's a sense in which Romans 1:16-8:39 is a tightly structured, self contained argumentative unit. Paul announces his definition of the gospel in compressed form in 1:16-17 and then explains it fully in 1:18-8:39, bringing his explanations to a close with a stirring affirmation of God's love for his people in 8:38-39. Paul has explained that the gospel announces not only God's righteous judgment on human sin (1:18-3:20) but also God's righteous salvation of sinful humanity (3:2-4:25) so that believers now live at peace with God and in the hope of inheriting a restored creation (5:1-8:39). God impartially gives sinners the wrath they deserve (1:18-3:20) and impartially justifies them through the atoning death of Christ and by faith, rather than works, whether of the Mosaic law or any law (3:21-4:25). He then graciously gives them peace, life, and hope (5:1-8:39).

The argument is so well-balanced that someone in Paul's audience who had followed the letter at a superficial level up to this point might think that at the end of chapter eight Paul was finished. He had demonstrated the human plight and God's solution to it in Christ. He had shown that this message about Christ was the gospel of God's righteous, saving power for everyone, whether Jew or gentile. He had shown, moreover, that the law and the prophets had pointed forward to the gospel as he described it (3:21). They too portrayed God as an impartial judge (2:6) and hinted that God would fulfill his promise to Abraham by including the nations within Abraham's family through faith (4:1-25).

This superficial reading is inadequate, however, because it does not take into account the relationship between the gospel as Paul has described it so far and the actual results of the gospel's proclamation. By the time Paul wrote Romans, the gospel was having its greatest success among gentiles rather than Jews, and Jews, when they heard the gospel, had sometimes actively, even violently, opposed it (Acts 13:45, 50; 17:5-7, 13; 18:6, 12-13; 19:9; 1 Thess 2:14-16). The ethnic composition of Roman Christianity itself, at least at the time Paul wrote his letter, matched the lopsided results of Paul's own preaching. Paul wrote his letter to "all" of God's people in Rome (Rom. 1:7), but the audience was predominantly gentile (1:13; 11:13; 15:15-16).

This historical reality called into question Paul's claim that the law and the prophets had laid the foundation for the gospel (1:2; 3:21) and especially that the gospel was the means by which God would fulfill his promise to Abraham (4:1-25). It may be true that the faith of gentiles in the gospel allows faithful Abraham to become the father of many nations, but if Abraham's own fleshly kinfolk form a minority within this group, how can Abraham, in the end, be "the father of us all" (4:16), and how can the gospel then be the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham at this basic level? If members of the multiethnic group who are united with Christ and indwelt by the Spirit are now the adoptive children of God (8:14-15, 23, 16-17, 21), then has God renounced Israel's status as his children as it is described in the law and the prophets (Exod 4:22-23; Deut 14:1; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1)?

In the exhilarating final paragraphs of his argument, Paul has said that no one can bring charges against God's chosen people (8:33) or separate them from God's love (8:39; cf. 8:35). Yet the



balance between Jews and gentiles among those who had believed the gospel in Paul's time called this assurance into question. If Paul's proclamation of the gospel has itself separated God from the very people he had chosen and promised to love in the Scriptures, then Paul's claim that his gospel was consistent with the Scriptures might seem empty or, worse yet, the God of Paul's gospel might seem unreliable. In the words of an anonymous Palestinian Jew of the first century urging God to be merciful to his people, "For even if you plant another vine, it will not trust you, because you destroyed the former one."

In Romans 9:1-11:36 Paul acknowledges the tragedy of Israel's rejection of the gospel (9:1-5) but then explains why this response does not pose a threat to the claims he has made about the consistency of the gospel with Israel's Scriptures (9:6-11:32). The means by which God shows himself faithful to Israel despite its present rejection of the gospel are unexpected and complex, and so Paul concludes this section of his argument with a statement of his amazement at the depth of God's power and wisdom (11:33-36). Between its sorrowful introduction (9:1-5) and its awestruck conclusion (11:33-36), the argument proceeds in three steps.

In 9:6-29 Paul explains two principles from the Scriptures that show that the current ethnic configuration of those who believe the gospel is not inconsistent with God's word. First, the Scriptures reveal that God's true people have always been a smaller group than the number of Abraham's physical descendants (9:6-23). Second, the Scriptures also support the notion that as God works out his historical purposes there will be times when gentiles outnumber Jews within the true people of God (9:24-29).

In 9:30-10:21 Paul answers a question that naturally arises from what he has just said about gentiles outnumbering Jews in the true people of God. How, from a human perspective, could this happen in light of the advantage over the gentiles that access to God's law gives to Jews? Paul answers that their zeal for the law blinded unbelieving Jews to the righteousness that God offered them in the gospel.

In 11:1-32 Paul asks a question that naturally arises from the case he has just made that most Jews have rejected the righteousness of God in the gospel. Does this mean that God has also rejected them? Surprisingly, Paul says that this conclusion is not correct. Not only does a present remnant of Jewish believers exist (11:1-10) but eventually, when God has fully implemented his plan for history, vast numbers of Jews will be saved (11:11-32). Eventually, God will use Jewish rejection and gentile acceptance of the gospel (9:30-10:21) to save "all Israel" (11:11-32).