

GOD'S PLAN FOR SALVATION BY GRACE NOT WORKS AND THE IMPACT ON  
THE NATION OF ISRAEL: A STUDY OF ROMANS 11:1-6

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An Exegetical Study

by

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April 2013

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## INTRODUCTION

Paul of Tarsus identifies himself the following way: "...I am an Apostle of Gentiles..." (Rom 11.13).<sup>1</sup> To interpret this statement to mean that Paul did not care about the nation of Israel or would not preach the Gospel to Jews would be incorrect.

This paper will focus on the Scripture paragraph (Rom 11.1-6):

1. I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. 2. God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew. Or do you not know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel? 3. "Lord, they have killed Your prophets, they have torn down Your altars, and I alone am left, and they are seeking my life." 4. But what is the divine response to him? "I have kept for Myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." 5. In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice. 6. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

Paul's mission and ministry, as revealed and ordained by Jesus Christ Himself, was to preach to all the world that God's plan of salvation was available to both Jew and Gentile.

Paul said God revealed to him that God's plan of salvation was by His gracious choice and not by works alone. Paul felt the nation of Israel did not understand this truth. Paul

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from the NASB Version, copyrighted 1995, The Lockman Foundation, all rights reserved, used by permission.

was also concerned that the Gentile Christian majority was gloating over its cultural differences being accepted by God, while the Jews could not understand why the Gentile Christians did not fall under the Law as they had been required to be.

Paul was a devout<sup>2</sup> Jew that respected his Pharisaic heritage. He knew the Old Testament Scriptures and he wanted all the nation of Israel to repent, and accept Christ for who He really was. He wanted Israel to believe, and then live in peace with the Gentiles that were becoming Christians. He wanted unity between the two groups of Christians. Both groups needed to show improvement in this regard. Paul addressed both groups in his letter to the Romans. He also addressed, through the use of diatribe, the arguments he would most likely receive when he presented this new revelation from God concerning His salvation plan for all nations.

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<sup>2</sup> W. E. Vine, *Vine's Concise Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2005.), 294. (eulabes, "taking hold well", "pious")

## HISTORICAL/CULTURAL CONTEXT

### *Authorship*

Most scholars agree that the Apostle Paul authored the book of Roman's<sup>3</sup>. Paul identifies himself in the greeting of this letter (Rom 1.1) as he did in the other letters he wrote.

Paul cites in Romans his future plans, that parallel events of his third missionary journey described by Luke in the book of Acts. Paul mentions the collection for the saints in Jerusalem coming to an end in Macedonia and Achaia. He continues to write that he now plans to take this collection to Rome (Rom 15.22-25). Tertius was his amanuensis.<sup>4</sup> Even though Tertius served Paul as his amanuensis or “secretary”, and inserts his own greeting in the letter (Rom 16.22), there is no evidence that says he would have been

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3 William MacDonald, *Believer's Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 1673.

4 Ibid.

involved in the composition of this letter.<sup>5</sup> It is likely, since he did insert his own greeting and would have access to the all the dictation of Paul, he wrote this letter as Paul dictated.

### *Time of Writing*

Paul points out that he was about to embark on a visit to Jerusalem (Rom 15.25), to take the collection to the saints there. This would have been at the end of Paul's ministry in Asia Minor and Greece that Luke writes about in Acts 20. This indicates the letter was written in the mid 50's (55-57 AD).<sup>6</sup>

### *Place of Writing*

The book of Romans was written from the city of Corinth where Paul stayed for about three months, at the end of his third missionary journey. Paul was heading back to Jerusalem to deliver the collection from the churches of Macedonia and Achaia when he wrote the letter.

### *Audience*

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5 Douglas J. Moo, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle To The Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 2.

6 Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Dictionary of Paul of Paul and His Letters* (Nashville, 1993), 838.

Paul was writing to all the Christians in Rome. These Christians would have been predominately Gentile, with a minority of Jewish believers. Paul did not indicate that his audience was an organized single congregation of believers. In answering the question “What was the ethnic composition of the Christians in Rome?”, John B. Polhill states:

Paul never referred to “the church” of Rome. Instead, he addressed the letter to “all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints (Rom 1.7). Likely, there were a number of house churches in Rome, not a single congregation, and the communities may have varied in ethnic composition. Paul wrote a general letter addressed to them all.<sup>7</sup>

Paul would go on to further clarify what he meant by “all” later in the letter when he described God’s Plan of Salvation. While Claudius was the Roman emperor (in the mid 50’s) the Jews had been expelled from Rome. The expulsion occurred prior to when Paul’s letter to the Romans was written. The Gentile Christians did not have to leave, so their congregations continued to grow. When Claudius died, the Jews and the Jewish Christians were able to return to Rome. The ethnic dynamic of the Christian community was different when they returned. Moo relates:

Specifically, the Gentile element in the churches, undoubtedly present before the expulsion, would have come into greater prominence as a result of the absence for a time of all (or virtually all) the Jewish Christians.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> John B. Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 1999, 279.

<sup>8</sup> Moo, *The Epistle of Romans*, 5.

So, when Paul wrote the letter to the Romans he intended it to reach “all” the Christians in Rome. He would have known that both Jew and Gentile Christian alike would read or hear his words. He also knew that unsaved Jews would hear his words. Knowing these things, he would have an important platform to discuss Jewish/Gentile Christian relationships and be able to elaborate and teach about the unity that should exist between the two groups. Also, this gave him the opportunity to further teach God’s plan of salvation that is, and has always been, available for all nations, including the unsaved Jews.

## STRUCTURE

### *Literary Form and Genre*

The book of Romans is considered an epistol or letter. Although it is not addressed to a specific church or a specific individual in response to a specific issue, it is addressed to a specific community (Roman Christians) at a specific time (prior to and in preparation for Paul's visit to Rome).

The letter has an introduction or greeting and has a conclusion. Between this beginning and end there was the body of the letter. The writing style would have been one that a literate audience of that time period, like the Christians in Rome, would have been familiar with.<sup>9</sup>

The letter uses a style that Paul frequently used called the "Diatribes", which involved Paul writing as though he was speaking and interacting with an imaginary interlocutor.<sup>10</sup>

### *Key Words*

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<sup>9</sup> Hawthorne, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 841.

<sup>10</sup> Hawthorne, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, 841.

There are three key words in Romans that clearly stand out in the text and are important in understanding the emphasis of the writing:

*Grace, Righteousness, and Nations*

Looking to the Greek usage of these words gives insight into what Paul was communicating to his Christian audience and to everyone else. First, “Grace”, (*charis*, that property in a thing, which causes it to give joy to the hearers or beholders of it... After a while it came to signify not necessarily the grace or beauty of a thing, but the gracious or beautiful thing, act, thought, speech, or person it might be itself. There is a further sense, which the word obtained, namely, the thankfulness which the favor calls out in return.)<sup>11</sup> Paul elaborates on what God’s “Grace” means later in the letter (Rom 11.5-6).

The second key word is “Righteousness”, (*dikaiosune*, right action. Paul uses this word for that gracious gift of God to men whereby all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ are brought into right relationship with God. This righteousness is unattainable by obedience to any law, or by any merit of man’s own, or any other condition than that of faith in Christ... The man who trusts in Christ becomes the righteousness of God in Him.)<sup>12</sup>

The last key word is “Nations”, (*ethnos*, in the New Testament *ethnos* is used to describe a “multitude” or a “people”; when used in the singular it most often refers to the people or Nation of Israel; when used in the plural “nations” is used the meaning is

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11 Kenneth S. Wuest, *Wuest’s Word Studies From the Greek New Testament* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 15-16.

12 Vines, 320.

to identify the people of the lands other than Israel; foreigners or “phulon”.)<sup>13</sup> Those who read or heard the words of Paul knew this distinction.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 252.

## ANALYSIS

### *God's Plan for Salvation has Always Been for Jews and Gentiles*

When God revealed His plan of salvation to Paul he would know from his study of the Old Testament that the plan had been there all along. God was implementing a new Covenant for the age, and He had previously blinded the eyes of the Jews to the Old Testament writings and prophesies regarding God's own desire that "all people" be called His people. The context for whom Jesus came to Earth, suffered, and died for was "all nations" (Det 32.21, Isa 65 1.2).

Paul also knew that the Jewish people would have a difficult time understanding or believing that God intended to provide salvation to all nations, not just Israel. The idea of a new covenant people that was not Israel specific would have been problematic for the Jews. In the beginning of Paul's letter he is identifying all converts to Christ in this way: "to all who are beloved of God in Rome, called as saints" (Rom 1.7). By the time the letter reaches the focal paragraph of this paper (Rom 11.1-6), Paul would have to explain in detail the role Israel played in God's plan.

*Focal Passage: Romans 11: 1.6*

*Impact on the Jews*

Paul knew that the Jews would not understand the new Covenant Gospel message of salvation to the Gentiles being preached by the Apostles. This new message was salvation by grace through faith and not of works. Paul was a Jew and a Pharisee. As a Pharisee he was a zealous persecutor of the Christians before his conversion on the Damascus road. Now he had to convince those that he had been like. He knew how difficult a challenge this was going to be. He also knew the basis for their arguments.

N.T. Wright states:

Which type of Pharisee? Saul's persecution of the church, and the word 'zeal' with which he describes it, puts him firmly on the map of a certain type of first-century Judaism. It gives us access to quite a wide database with which to plot the sort of agendas he must have been following, agendas which make sense of his activity in persecuting the church even beyond the borders of the Holy Land itself. It reveals Saul of Tarsus not just as a Jew, but as a Pharisee; not just as a Pharisee, but as a Shammaite Pharisee; not just, perhaps, as a Shammaite Pharisee, but as one of the strictest of the strict.<sup>14</sup>

Paul writes: "I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! I too am an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." (Rom 11.1-2). He wants them to know how he was once just like them, maybe even more zealous.

The salvation to the Gentiles did not eradicate the Law from Jewish believers. Theilman relates these words attributed to an anonymous commentary of the Latin translation of

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<sup>14</sup> N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdsman Publishing Company, 1997), 26.

Paul's letters: "Jews who had believed [in Christ] passed on to the Romans the tradition that they ought to profess Christ but keep the law... One ought not to condemn the Romans, but to praise their faith; because without seeing any signs or miracles and without seeing any of the apostles, they nevertheless accepted faith in Christ, although according to a Jewish rite.<sup>15</sup> Paul continues (verse 2) by calling their attention to the Old Testament Scripture about how Elijah complained to God about the Jews and felt that the Jews had dishonored God and that there were none left but Elijah that was righteous (I Ki 19.10,14). God answers Elijah with the fact that He has always kept a remnant of His people to serve Him (I Ki 19.18). This remnant is a key theological point that Paul brings out in this passage. Moo points out: "Paul defends his thesis that God has not rejected His people (Israel)... with his remnant teaching."<sup>16</sup> It will become an important point in Israel's immediate future and beyond. God's response is relevant for the Jews then and in the present time.

### *Unity between Jew and Gentile Christians*

Paul knew about boasting. James R. Beck writes: "Paul used contemporary conventions of boasting in order to persuade his converts to do or be something."<sup>17</sup> Paul was addressing the possible gloating from the Gentile Christians to Jewish converts

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<sup>15</sup> Frank Thielm, *Paul and the Law* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 162.

<sup>16</sup> Moo, 672.

regarding being exempt from the law. This caused undue tension between the groups and raised questions from the Jewish Christians regarding their previous covenant importance with God. Ultimately, Paul pointed out, it is God's divine choice (Rom 11.5) to provide salvation to both Jew and Gentile alike. The Jews should not complain that the Gentiles did not have to follow the law, and the Gentiles should not boast that they did not have to follow the law. Paul wanted both groups of Christians to adopt the heart of Christ and be at peace with each other.

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17 James R. Beck, *The Psychology of Paul* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2002), 98.

## CONCLUSION

In Romans 11.6 Paul concludes the message of grace by faith with another answer to a possible question people would have. Paul anticipated the question of “what about following the Law as God commanded; how does the Law and good works apply to salvation?” Paul says that if salvation is by God’s choice of grace, then it is no longer because of works.

For thousands of years Israel misunderstood their election as a chosen people. They didn’t understand remnant teaching. God had always planned to use the nation of Israel to bring forth his Salvation Plan of Grace. Through Israel salvation was made available to the Gentiles. Richard N. Longenecker states Israel’s significance to the Salvation Plan of God the way Paul saw them in these terms: “...he is a Jewish Apostle (Rom 11.1), who on behalf of Israel and for the sake of Israel’s ultimate salvation, is declaring to the other, non-Jewish nations that in Christ they too can be members of the family of Abraham (cf. Rom 4; Galatians 3)”.<sup>18</sup>

John Gill writes that Paul was addressing the possible argument from the Jews that God had broken his promise to the nation of Israel (Rom 1,2) by further clarifying

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<sup>18</sup> Richard N. Longenecker, *The Road from Damascus: The Impact of Paul’s Conversion on His Life, Thought, and Ministry* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 77.

that God's chosen people are those "He foreknew; for all mankind are in a sense His people".<sup>19</sup> The nation of Israel was doing what they thought God was asking of them by following the law, but they didn't understand remnant teaching in their Old Testament Scripture.

God's Righteousness means that His choice cannot be criticized or questioned. It also means that He will not break his promises.

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<sup>19</sup> John Gill, *Exposition of the Old and New Testaments* (Washington D.C.: OSNOVA Kindle Edition, 2012), Location 304982.

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