

‘JACOB I LOVED, BUT ESAU I HATED’: CORPORATE OR INDIVIDUAL ELECTION IN PAUL’S ARGUMENT IN ROMANS 9?

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THE APOSTLE PAUL’S treatment of the doctrine of election in Romans 9-11 is arguably the most extensive treatment of the topic in all of Scripture. Even though the history of redemption recounted in the Scriptures tells the story of the gracious initiative of the Triune God, who relentlessly works to draw his people into renewed fellowship with himself, Paul’s engagement with God’s “purpose of election” in Romans 9-11 presents the matter in the boldest possible light. Due to the extensiveness of Paul’s engagement with the doctrine of election in this passage, the interpretation of this passage has inevitably played a crucial role in theological reflection on the Scripture’s teaching.

In the historic interpretation of this passage in Reformed theology, which follows the lead set forth by the influential church father, Augustine, Romans 9 is understood to teach the unconditional election of a particular number of persons unto salvation. Among the Reformed churches, this understanding is codified confessionally in the Canons of Dort 1/10, which appeals expressly to Romans 9:11-13 to confirm that God’s purpose of election involves his free and gracious decision to adopt “certain particular persons” for salvation:

But the cause of this undeserved election is exclusively the good pleasure of God. This does not involve his choosing certain human qualities or actions from among all those possible as a condition of salvation, but rather involves his adopting certain particular persons from among the common mass of sinners as his own possession. As Scripture says, *When the children were not yet born, and had done nothing either good or bad ... , she (Rebecca) was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated” (Rom. 9:11-13). Also, All who were appointed for eternal life believed (Acts 13:48).*¹

1. *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions*, classroom ed. (Dyer, IN: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991), 63.

The point of this confessional statement is that God's purpose of election does not involve the choice of an indefinite number of persons who meet certain God-ordained stipulations in order to be saved. If this were the case, divine election would only entail the choice of a class of persons who do what is required of them in order to be saved. In the historical context of the Synod of Dort, Article I/10 aims to refute the Arminian claim that God's purpose of election is based upon his foreknowledge of those persons who meet the evangelical obligation to believe in Christ in order to be saved. In its refutation of the Arminian position, Romans 9:11-13 is adduced as a clear *locus classicus* for a doctrine of God's merciful and gracious election of specific persons unto salvation. When Paul cites the example of God's election of Jacob in contrast with his non-election of Esau, the authors of this article regard this as compelling evidence that God's choice terminates upon specific persons to whom he wills to show mercy.

Although this interpretation of Paul's argument in Romans 9 is a commonplace in the Augustinian/Calvinistic understanding of divine election, it has met with considerable resistance in more recent theological treatments of election. While resistance to this view is frequently expressed by Arminian theologians, it also finds a place among theologians who believe Paul's argument in Romans 9 should be read less individualistically. Though the arguments against the historic Reformed interpretation of Romans 9 are diverse, they often express a conviction that it represents an abstract reading of Paul's argument. Paul's interest in this passage is more broadly located within his understanding of the history of redemption in general, and God's saving intention toward Israel in distinction from the Gentiles in particular. For these interpreters, Romans 9 does not present us with a non-historical treatment of God's eternal decree, which focuses upon those specific persons whom he graciously chooses to save. Rather, Romans 9 addresses the more comprehensive question in the history of redemption, namely, the respective places of Israel and the Gentiles in God's gracious purposes as these are realized within history.

The dissatisfaction of some with the traditional interpretation of Romans 9 can be expressed in terms of the question whether or not Paul is focusing upon God's "purpose of election" in respect to the salvation of individuals or corporate peoples (Israel and the Gentiles). In the historic Reformed view, the emphasis falls upon God's purpose to save specific persons. But is this really the issue that Paul is addressing in Romans 9? Those who criticize this emphasis note that it does not do justice to the occasion for Paul's treatment of God's "purpose of election" in Romans 9-11. Since Paul treats the entire question in the context of his concern for the salvation of Israel within the saving purpose of God, Romans 9 must be read as a part of a larger argument that concludes in Romans 11, which speaks of the

salvation of “all Israel” (Rom. 11:26a). The concern of the apostle Paul in these chapters is to articulate how the gospel of Jesus Christ is ultimately “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Rom. 1:16).

My aim in this article will be to address this specific question: is the historic Reformed view, which interprets Paul’s argument in Romans 9 to teach God’s merciful election of specific persons to salvation, defensible on biblical and theological grounds? I will not attempt to offer anything like a comprehensive exegesis of Romans 9, especially in its relation to the entire argument that Paul sets forth in Romans 9-11 as a whole. My focus will be upon the limited issue of the nature of Paul’s argument in Romans 9:6-16, especially the point of his distinction between the common election of Israel to special privileges within the history of redemption and the particular election to salvation of some from among the people of Israel. In order to accomplish this limited, and somewhat modest, aim, I will begin with a sketch of the historic Reformed view as it is represented in Calvin’s commentary on Romans. Thereafter, I will offer a summary of several different readings of Paul’s argument in Romans 9, each of which offers a version of a corporate understanding of the apostle Paul’s teaching on election in this chapter. In the third section of my article, I will revisit Paul’s argument in Romans 9:6-16 and offer a defense of a slightly modified version of the traditional Reformed reading.

1. The Historic Augustinian/Calvinistic View: Individual Election in Romans 9

In order to set the stage for my consideration of more recent treatments of Romans 9 that diverge from the historic Reformed approach, I want to begin with a brief summary of Calvin’s interpretation of this passage. Calvin’s place as a leading theologian in the Reformed tradition is undeniable. With respect to the articulation of the doctrine of election and the interpretation of Romans 9, Calvin’s influence is especially important. For my purpose, I am particularly interested in the way Calvin understands Paul’s appeal to God’s purpose of election in the distinction made between Jacob and Esau. My interest is not in all of the details of Calvin’s exegesis of this passage, but in the way he characteristically argues that God’s “purpose of election” terminates upon certain individuals whom he elects to save.

Calvin introduces his treatment of Romans 9 by noting that Paul “passes to a discussion of the present topic so abruptly that there appears to be no connexion in his discourse, and yet he commences his new exposition as if he had already touched on it previously.”²

2. John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul to the Romans and Thessalonians*, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. R. Mackenzie, vol. 8 of *Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 190 (hereafter referred to as

Even though Calvin's introductory comment seems to imply that Romans 9 and following constitute a break in the flow of the argument of Romans, he goes on to observe that there is an important connection between the topic addressed in Romans 9 and what precedes it.³ Since the gospel is a fulfillment and confirmation of the "doctrine of the law and the prophets" of the Old Testament economy, the unbelief of many of Paul's Jewish contemporaries seems to belie this reality. How can Christ be the fulfillment of what was promised to the people of Israel, when so many among Paul's contemporaries are rejecting the gospel in unbelief upon the basis of a distorted appeal to the law of Moses? The immediate occasion for Paul's focus upon God's "purpose of election" in Romans 9 is poignantly identified in the opening verses of the chapter. In these verses, Paul certifies that he has great sorrow and anguish of heart over the unbelief of many of his kinsmen, the Israelites. Despite the privileges that belonged to Israel—adoption, the glory of the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises—many among them were unwilling to embrace Christ by faith and acknowledge him as the promised Messiah.

Calvin's reference to the "abruptness" of the change in focus at the beginning of Romans 9 should not be taken to mean that he believes Paul has interrupted the flow of his presentation in the epistle. The unbelief of many of Paul's kinsmen requires him to address the question whether or not their failure means that the Word of God has failed (verse 6). Since Paul introduces Romans with a strong affirmation of the gospel as the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes, and expressly declares that it is such "to the Jew first," it is not surprising that he should take up the enigma of the failure of so many Jews to believe in Christ. The apparent abruptness of Paul's change of focus is reinforced by the remarkable contrast between the close of chapter 8, which celebrates God's invincible love for his people in Christ, and the unbelief of those who were the recipients of the rich covenant promises of the Old Testament economy. The contrast between Israel's privileges and her present unbelief—especially when viewed against the backdrop of the gospel's power for the salvation of all who believe, Jews and Gentiles alike, and Paul's confidence in God's love in Christ for his people—prompts the apostle to engage extensively with the issue of God's purpose of election.

After commenting on the occasion for Paul's transition in Romans 9 to the topic of election, including a sorrowful lament regarding the

Comm. Rom.); *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, ed. G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss et al. (Brunsvigae, Schwetschke, 1863-1900), vol. 49, 169 (hereafter referred to as CO).

3. *Comm. Rom.* 190 (CO 49:169). Though the traditional reading of Romans 9 by Calvin and others is often criticized for its alleged failure to note the proper occasion in Romans for Paul's treatment of the doctrine of election, this and other comments by Calvin indicate that he is interested in this question and offers an answer to it.

unbelief of so many of his fellow Israelites, Calvin notes that Paul begins in verses 6-16 to answer the question whether or not the word of God has therefore failed with respect to Israel. According to Calvin, Paul's answer starts with an important distinction that must be drawn between God's "general election of the people of Israel" (*communis populi Israelitici electio*) and his "choosing for Himself by His secret counsel those whom he pleases" (*deligat arcano suo consilio Deus*).⁴ When Paul declares in verse 6, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed," he does so because "not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring." Commenting on these words, Calvin notes that "Paul's proposition is that the promise was given to Abraham and to his seed, but in such a way that his inheritance does not relate to all of his descendants without distinction."⁵ For Calvin, the point of Paul's proposition in verse 6 is that a distinction has to be made between the historic election of Israel as a people and the "true election" of some from among her number unto salvation.

We may, if it is preferred, put it in a different way: "The general election of the people of Israel does not prevent God from choosing for Himself by His secret counsel those whom He pleases." God's condescension in making a covenant of life with a single nation is indeed a remarkable illustration of undeserved mercy, but His hidden grace is more evident in the second election (*secunda electione*), which is restricted to a part of the nation only.⁶

When this distinction between "all the descendants" of Abraham and those among them who are "true sons" is acknowledged, the problem of the unbelief of many of Abraham's descendants can be resolved. The unbelief of many among the descendants of Abraham confirms that they do not truly belong to Israel.

In Calvin's interpretation of verses 7-16, Paul adduces the history of God's dealings with Isaac in distinction from Ishmael, and his dealings with Jacob in distinction from Esau, to illustrate how God's "purpose of election" distinguishes between those who belong to the people of Israel as a whole and those among the people of Israel whom God has elected to save. When Paul appeals to the language of Genesis 22:12 ("through Isaac shall your offspring be named"), he

4. *Comm. Rom. Rom.* 9:6, 197 (CO 49:175).

5. *Comm. Rom.* 9:6, 197 (CO 49:175).

6. *Comm. Rom.* 9:6, 197-98 (CO 49:175). Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), IV.21.6, where Calvin distinguishes the general election of the people of Israel from what he calls "a second, more limited degree (*secundus gradus restrictior*) of election, or one in which God's more special grace was evident, that is, when from the same race of Abraham God rejected some but showed that he kept others among his sons by cherishing them in the church."

does so “in order to show that the secret election of God overrules the outward reality (*electionem arcanam Dei supra externam vocationem dominari*).”⁷ If among the first of Abraham’s descendants, Isaac and Ishmael, God chooses to grant the blessing of salvation to one and not the other, we see how from the beginning of God’s dealings with his people Israel “certain men are elected from the chosen people by special privilege, and in these the common adoption becomes efficacious and valid.”⁸ When confronted with the apparent failure of the Word of God to effect salvation for many of his contemporaries among God’s covenant people Israel, Paul aims at this point to show that this pattern was also true at the inception of God’s gracious dealings with Israel from the time of Abraham onward. The pattern is one that requires the recognition of a distinction between God’s common adoption of the people of Israel and his secret election of some from among their number unto salvation.

If the seed is called in Isaac and not in Ishmael it must be that not all natural sons are to be regarded as the seed, but that the promise is fulfilled in a special way only in some, and does not belong equally and in common to all. Those who have no greater virtue than natural descent, Paul calls *children of the flesh*, just as those who are peculiarly sealed by the Lord are called children of the promise.⁹

In Calvin’s judgment, the second illustration that Paul introduces in this section of the argument in Romans 9—the distinction between Jacob and Esau, the twin sons of Rebecca—elevates the matter to a higher level. With this illustration, it becomes even clearer that the difference between those who are children of the flesh and those who are children of the promise is “found in the election of God alone.”¹⁰ In the first illustration, Paul passes over in silence the reason that not all who were “adopted into participation in the covenant” come to enjoy effectually the salvation promised them.

But now he [i.e., Paul] plainly refers the whole cause to the unmerited election of God, which in no way depends on men. In the salvation of the godly we are to look for no higher cause than the goodness of God, and no higher cause in the destruction of the reprobate than His just severity. Paul’s first proposition, therefore, is as follows: “As the blessing of the covenant separates the people of Israel from all other nations, so also the election of God makes a distinction between men in that nation, while He predestinates some to salvation, and

7. *Comm. Rom.* 9:6, 198 (CO 49:176).

8. *Comm. Rom.* 9:6, 198 (CO 49:176).

9. *Comm. Rom.* 9:8, 198 (CO 49:176).

10. *Comm. Rom.* 9:11, 199 (CO 49:177).

others to eternal condemnation.” The second proposition is, “There is no other basis for this election than the goodness of God alone, and also His mercy since the fall of Adam, which embraces those whom He pleases, without any regard whatever to their works.” The third is, “The Lord in His unmerited election is free and exempt from the necessity of bestowing equally the same grace on all. Rather, He passes by those whom He will, and chooses whom He wills.”¹¹

For Calvin, it is especially important that Paul, in his appeal to the distinction between Jacob and Esau, emphasizes that God’s purpose of election does not find its ground in anything that would distinguish the two. Before Jacob or Esau were born, and before they had done anything good or bad, God determined to show mercy to Jacob and not to Esau. In this way, the mercy shown to Jacob is seen to be born of God’s sheer grace, apart from any human works on the part of its recipient.

While Calvin does not hesitate to affirm that God’s sovereign election is the ultimate ground for the distinction between Jacob and Esau, he takes special pains to insist that Paul’s assumption is that both of them “were children of Adam, sinners by nature, and not possessed of a single particle of righteousness.”¹² Neither Jacob nor Esau were deserving of God’s mercy. Both were justly deserving of condemnation and death. And yet God, to demonstrate that salvation derives exclusively from his decision to show mercy according to his purpose of election, chooses to save Jacob and not Esau. While there is no exact parallel between God’s merciful election of Jacob and his just reprobation of Esau, God’s choice to save or not to save within his purpose of election is an expression of his just will.

It is true that the immediate cause of reprobation is the curse which we all inherit from Adam. Nevertheless, Paul withdraws us from this view, so that we may learn to rest in the bare and simple good pleasure of God, until he has established the doctrine that God has a sufficiently just cause for election and reprobation in His own will.¹³

In Calvin’s interpretation of Paul’s appeal to the distinction between Jacob and Esau, the accent falls entirely upon the way in which this distinction excludes entirely “any consideration of works” as a basis, either in part or in whole, for the salvation of fallen sinners in Adam. In the matter of salvation, everything depends upon God’s goodness and grace, his free determination to show mercy to

11. *Comm. Rom.* 9:11, 199-200 (CO 49:177).

12. *Comm. Rom.* 9:11, 200 (CO 49:178).

13. *Comm. Rom.* 9:11, 200-1 (CO 49:178).

those whom he elects to save. Since this is the clear teaching of Paul in this passage, we are obliged to rest in the wisdom and justice of God, and to pattern our teaching after the standard of what the Spirit teaches us in Scripture.¹⁴

While there is much more that could be said regarding Calvin's interpretation of Paul's argument in Romans 9, this brief overview is sufficient for my purpose. Calvin understands Paul's appeal to the cases of Isaac and Ishmael to be evidence for God's undeserved, merciful election of some among the people of Israel. For Calvin, God's merciful election distinguishes between those who are truly children of the promise and those who are not.

2. Recent Examples of a Corporate Election Interpretation of Romans 9

As I noted in my introductory comments, modern interpretations of Romans 9 have tended to call into question the traditional interpretation of Augustine and Calvin. Whereas Calvin, following Augustine, considers Paul's argument in Romans 9 to involve a clear distinction between those whom God has chosen to save and others whom he has not chosen to save, this is often challenged in more recent expositions of Romans 9 and following. In the opinion of a number of theologians, Calvin's view fails to do justice to the way Romans 9 serves a broader purpose in the argument of Romans 9-11. By focusing upon the election of specific persons to salvation, Calvin's interpretation fails to recognize that Paul is addressing the question of God's merciful intention toward Israel and the Gentiles within the history of redemption. For many recent interpreters of Romans 9, the place of Israel as a people within the scope of God's purpose of election is Paul's primary focus. Rather than an interpretation that accents the broad scope of God's saving intention in Christ for Israel and the Gentiles alike, Calvin's view raises the specter of God's inscrutable purpose to save some individuals, whether Jews or Gentiles, and the reach of God's mercy toward all who believe in Jesus Christ is diminished. While there are competent commentators who continue to read Romans 9 in a way that supports Calvin's position,¹⁵ many others argue that Paul's emphasis falls exclusively upon the corporate identity of Israel within God's purpose of election.

14. *Comm. Rom.* 9:14, 203 (CO 49:180).

15. See, e.g., John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), xi-xvi, 1-45; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 547-616; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 469-532; idem, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation?," in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 89-106; John R. W. Stott, *Romans: God's Care for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994), 261-78.

Though the forms of what I am calling a “corporate election” interpretation of Romans 9 vary and are based upon quite distinct theological emphases, I wish to consider two broad expressions of this approach in more recent theology. The first expression is found in Karl Barth’s theological interpretation of Romans 9 within the context of his revision of the historic Reformed doctrine of predestination. The second expression is found within the orbit of biblical-theological treatments of Paul’s argument in Romans 9 through 11. Of these two expressions of a corporate election interpretation, Barth’s is clearly motivated by broader theological concerns that require, in his judgment, a rather thorough revision of the traditional Reformed doctrine of predestination. Since Barth’s interpretation can only be understood within this context, I will give it greater attention than the second expression of the corporate election view. As we shall observe, biblical-theological interpretations of Romans 9 that accent the corporate identity of those whom God elects to save are based more directly upon exegetical considerations, and do not always fall easily into the traditional categories of an “Arminian” or “Calvinistic” view of election.

2.1. Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Election and the Interpretation of Romans 9:6-16

It is fitting that I should begin with a treatment of Karl Barth’s doctrine of election. No theologian in the modern period—and that includes not a few Reformed theologians of considerable ability—has written more extensively on the doctrine of election than Barth. And no theologian has offered a more substantial revision of the contours of traditional Reformed teaching on predestination than Barth. In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth locates the doctrine of election squarely within the context of the doctrine of God.¹⁶ Consistent with the starting point of his dogmatics in the doctrine of God’s self-revelation in and through Jesus Christ, apart from which there is no possible knowledge of the true and living God, Barth insists that election lies at the heart of what God has revealed regarding himself. God can only be known through God, and that knowledge is given to us exclusively in his acts in Jesus Christ, the eternal Word of God become incarnate. The doctrine of election reveals who God is in his eternal self-determination to be a God for us in Jesus Christ. For this reason, early in his treatment of election, Barth insists, “The election of grace [is] ... the sum of the Gospel ... the whole of the Gospel, the Gospel *in nuce*.”¹⁷ The good news that is revealed to us in the gospel is the good news that God has determined to be known by the name

16. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. II/2: *The Doctrine of God*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957).

17. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:13-14.

of Jesus Christ, that is, as the God who wills graciously to be for us in him.

But it is not only that Barth places the doctrine of election at the core of his doctrine of God. He also intends to offer a revised doctrine of election that removes the difficulties allegedly associated with the traditional doctrine of Calvin. Already in the preface to volume II/2 of the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth notes that he found it necessary to depart from Calvin's theology at this juncture:

The work has this peculiarity, that in it I have had to leave the framework of theological tradition to a far greater extent than in the first part on the doctrine of God. I would have preferred to follow Calvin's doctrine of predestination much more closely, instead of departing from it so radically. ... But I could not and cannot do so. As I let the Bible itself speak to me on these matters, as I meditated upon what I seemed to hear, I was driven irresistibly to reconstruction.¹⁸

In Barth's estimation, Calvin's doctrine of election burdens the Scripture's teaching with the notion of a secret, inscrutable, and non-gracious will of God. The note of God's triumphant grace in Jesus Christ is muted in Calvin's teaching, and placed alongside a contrary note, one which speaks of an unknown and unknowable God who is opposed to those toward whom he chooses not to be gracious. Of special importance to Barth's reconstruction of the doctrine of election is the way he diverges from Calvin on the interpretation of Romans 9. Consistent with the main features of his revised doctrine of election, Barth maintains that Paul's interest in this passage is not with the election or non-election of particular persons among the children of Israel, but in Israel's corporate role in the realization of God's gracious purpose for all whom he elects in Jesus Christ.

2.1.1. Key Features of Barth's Doctrine of Election

Before I consider Barth's treatment of Romans 9, it is necessary to begin with a summary of the key features of Barth's doctrine of election. Without an awareness of the principal features of Barth's reconstruction of the doctrine of election, it will be impossible to understand Barth's interpretation of Romans 9, especially the way he views Paul's exposition of Israel's unique role in the revelation of God's purpose of election.

Barth begins his treatment of the doctrine of election in his *Church Dogmatics* by reiterating the starting point of his doctrine of God. We must know and speak of God only as he is known concretely in and through Jesus Christ. Any knowledge or speech about God

18. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2: x.

that is not based upon God's free decision to enter into covenant with man in the person of Jesus Christ is an abstraction. God is who he is in Jesus Christ, and there is no other God than the God who determines to be for us in him. As Barth puts it,

If we would know what election is, what it is to be elected by God, then we must look away from all others, and excluding all side-glances or secondary thoughts we must look only upon the name of Jesus Christ and upon the actual existence and history of the people whose beginning and end are enclosed in the mystery of His name.¹⁹

For Barth, all knowledge of the true and living God must be derived from the way God acts in his free decision to elect humanity for communion with himself in Christ. In this act, and in the history of Jesus Christ that flows out of it, we find God himself to be one who loves in freedom and who is free in his loving. When speaking of election, therefore, we must speak only in a manner that corresponds to God's own choice to be and to be known by us as he is in Jesus Christ.

Consistent with this starting point and orientation to the doctrine of election, Barth insists that election lies at the core of Christian theology, particularly the doctrine of God. The first and primal decision of God is his decision to be one who loves in freedom, and who eternally wills to elect his people in Jesus Christ. God's election is his eternal self-determination to be God in the act of electing his Son or Word. In the eternal act of election, God determines his own being as the Word, full of grace and truth. In this eternal act of self-determination, God determines to be and to be known only in this way: as the God who eternally wills to covenant with all men in Jesus Christ, and to give himself wholly to the realization of this purpose through the reconciling work of Jesus Christ.

In so far as God not only is love, but loves, in the act of love which determines His whole being God elects. And in so far as this act of love is an election, it is at the same time and as such the act of His freedom. There can be no subsequent knowledge of God, whether from His revelation or from His work as disclosed in that revelation, which is not as such knowledge of this election. There can be no Christian truth which does not from the very first contain within itself as its basis the fact that from and to all eternity God is the electing God. There can be no tenet of Christian doctrine which if it is to be a Christian tenet does not necessarily reflect both in form and content this divine electing—the eternal electing in

19. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:58-59.

which and in virtue of which God does not will to be God, and is not God, apart from those who are His, apart from those who are His people.²⁰

Upon the basis of these claims regarding our knowledge of God's act of election—that such knowledge must be exclusively derived from God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, and that such knowledge belongs properly to the doctrine of God—Barth takes up the doctrine of election directly and develops his revised view under three broad headings: first, God's election is “the election of Jesus Christ”;²¹ second, God's election is the “election of the community”;²² and third, God's election is “the election of the individual.”²³ Before I consider

20. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:76-77. In recent years, considerable debate has arisen regarding how to understand Barth's doctrine of election, particularly how to interpret his claim that God's “being” is determined by his “act” of election in Jesus Christ. Bruce McCormack's influential essay, “Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology” (in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], 92-110), initiated the debate, when he argued that “election is the event in God's life in which he assigns to himself the being he will have for all eternity” (96). In McCormack's interpretation of Barth's doctrine of election, Barth offers a more radical actualistic ontology in volume II/2 of his *Church Dogmatics* than in volume II/1. In his formulation of the doctrine of election, Barth no longer distinguished between God's being as Trinity from his free or “contingent” self-determination to become incarnate for us and for our salvation. For McCormack, God's election of Jesus Christ is an act in which he eternally constituted himself to be the God he is in Jesus Christ, so that God's being Trinity is itself a consequence of this self-determination. On this reading of Barth, the “immanent” Trinity (who God is as Triune before and apart from his electing to save in Jesus Christ) is collapsed into the “economic” Trinity (who God is as Triune by virtue of his free act of electing to save in Jesus Christ), and the existence of the world is necessary to God's being the Triune God he chooses to be. While a number of writers have embraced and defended McCormack's interpretation, others have argued that a “generous” reading of Barth requires that he be read as retaining the distinction between the absolute mode of existence of the second Person of the Trinity (the *Logos asarkos*, the Word “before” or “apart” from the incarnation) and the relative mode of existence of the second Person of the Trinity (the *Logos ensarkos*, the Word “become flesh” by virtue of God's gracious self-determination in the election of Jesus Christ). For an introduction to this complicated debate and the arguments on both sides, see Michael T. Dempsey, ed., *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). I am inclined to the second interpretation of Barth, even though there are certainly passages in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* that lend encouragement to those who follow McCormack's more radical reading of Barth's view. For a defense of the second interpretation, see Paul D. Molnar, “Can the Electing God Be God Without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity,” in *Trinity and Election*, 63-90; George Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015); and Paul Helm, “Karl Barth and the Visibility of God,” in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (Nottingham: Apollon, 2008), 273-99. Helm nicely summarizes the problem McCormack's interpretation raises: “For is Barth positing a God who assigns himself a being, or a character? Does this mean that God does not already have a character?” (284).

21. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:94ff.

22. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:195ff.

23. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:306ff.

Barth's reading of Paul's argument in Romans 9, a brief sketch of each of these three features is necessary.

The most important revision of the traditional doctrine of election occurs in Barth's treatment of the election of Jesus Christ. Contrary to the idea of an "absolute decree" (*decretum absolutum*) in which God secretly and sovereignly elects to save some and not others, Barth maintains that God's election is an eternal act in Jesus Christ, who is both electing God and elected man. The fatal error of the older doctrine of election is that it posits an unknown God who elects to save some and not others. Jesus Christ is not the beginning and the end of all of God's gracious purposes, but merely a means to an end. But if Jesus Christ is the eternal Word of God, as we read in the prologue of the Gospel of John ("in the beginning was the Word... and the Word was God"),²⁴ then we may not speak or know anything *extra* about God in the doctrine of election than what we are given to know in Jesus Christ alone.

Before Him and without Him and beside Him God does not, then, elect or will anything. And He is the election (and on that account the beginning and the decree and the Word) of the free grace of God. For it is God's free grace that in Him He elects to be man and to have dealings with man and to join Himself to man. He, Jesus Christ, is the free grace of God as not content simply to remain identical with the inward and eternal being of God, but operating *ad extra* in the ways and works of God.²⁵

While Barth explicitly rejects the idea that God's election in Jesus Christ was "necessary" for God to be who he is, he emphasizes that God's eternal election is an act whereby God determines to be gracious toward us, and to bear the name of Jesus Christ. By virtue of this eternal act of self-determination, "God has put Himself under an

24. Barth bases his understanding of the election of Jesus Christ upon an unusual reading of John 1:1: "The electing [of Jesus Christ, both as electing God and the elected man] consists in this Word and decree in the beginning" (*Church Dogmatics* II/2:100). Traditionally, Christian theologians have read John 1:1 as though it taught the self-existence of the eternal Son of God, who is to be distinguished from the Father and the Son, and through whom all things were made. Interestingly, Barth recognizes that his use of this passage is unusual in the history of theology, but he argues that it provides the proper biblical context within which to present a revised doctrine of election. Contrary to the traditional view, which assumes the pre-existence of the eternal Word "before" his self-determination to be electing God, Barth insists that God determines "to be" and "to be known" in no other act or self-determination than as the electing God in Jesus Christ. For Barth, the interpretation of Romans 9 and other biblical passages that speak of God's purpose of election must be hermeneutically governed by what he understands to be the teaching of John 1:1. See Stephen N. Williams, *The Election of Grace: A Riddle Without a Resolution?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 188-92.

25. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:94-95.

obligation to man, willing that that should be so which according to Jn. 1:1-2 actually is so. It is grace that it is so, and it is grace God willed it to be so.”²⁶ As the subject of election, Jesus Christ is not simply the instrument through whom God’s purpose of election is realized. Jesus Christ is himself the God who elects, and his will to do so is also the will of God himself.

But Jesus Christ is more than the subject of election—God who freely and lovingly wills to elect man in him. For Barth, Jesus Christ is also, and at the same time, the object of God’s election of man.

“[B]efore all created reality, before all being and becoming in time, before time itself, in the pre-temporal eternity of God, the eternal divine decision as such has as its object and content the existence of this one created being, the man Jesus of Nazareth, and the work of this man in His life and death, His humiliation and exaltation, His obedience and merit.”²⁷

The solution to the problem posed by the traditional doctrine of election, which distinguishes between God’s election of some to salvation and his reprobation of others to condemnation, lies in the proper recognition that God’s election is the election of the one man, Jesus Christ, and in him the election of all. Once this is established, the truth embedded in the traditional “supralapsarian” view of the order of God’s decrees becomes evident. God’s election of Jesus Christ is indeed the first, primal act of God from which all that God does in time follows. The true “object of election” (*obiectum praedestinationis*) must not be viewed either as a particular number of created and fallen human beings (the infralapsarian view) or as a particular number of not yet created and not yet fallen human beings (the supralapsarian view). Because the true object of election is the man Jesus Christ (and all human beings in him), we may affirm the truth of supralapsarianism, namely, that the first act of God’s self-determination is his gracious election or free decision to love all men in the one man whom he has elected, Jesus Christ. This gracious self-determination on God’s part is decisive for any biblical doctrine of election that avoids the abstraction of the traditional Reformed view, which separates God’s secret and unknown choice of some to salvation from God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ.

At this point in his exposition of the doctrine of election, Barth offers a remarkably novel interpretation of the legitimate sense in which we may speak of God’s purpose of election and reprobation. In the older “double predestination” view of Augustine and Calvin, God’s purpose of election is twofold: first, to show mercy to those individuals whom he wills to save (election); and second, to show justice to

26. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:101.

27. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:116.

those individuals whom he wills not to save (reprobation). Barth believes that this understanding of double predestination removes any sure footing for an assurance of God's grace and favor toward us. Who is able to fathom the depths of God's "secret will" so as to determine whether or not God's Word in Christ is a word in which God's grace triumphs? The older doctrine of election raises the fearful prospect of an unknown and unknowable God, a God who may be against us and not for us. However, if the object of election is the man Jesus Christ, who is both the God who elects and the man whom he elects, then we have assurance that God's grace triumphs in God's act of election. In this view, God's election is double in two closely related, albeit different, senses. The first of these senses, we have already considered: on the one hand, the God who elects, or the active subject in election, is Jesus Christ himself; and on the other hand, the man whom God elects, or the object of election, is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is both electing God and elected man.

The second of the senses in which election is double, however, needs now to be explored further. According to Barth, in this second sense of double election, we need to recognize that election means gracious election for the man Jesus Christ and reprobation for God. Election has a double consequence, grace and judgment, Yes and No, and this double consequence is assumed by God himself in Jesus Christ. At one and the same time, Jesus Christ is the elected man and the reprobated God. By his free decision of election, God has chosen to bear the rejection, punishment, and condemnation that all human beings deserve. And at the same time, God has chosen to say "Yes" to Jesus Christ as the man of his choosing, and in him to say "Yes" to all men. The following statements of Barth are representative of his view:

If the teachers of predestination were right when they spoke always of a duality, of election and reprobation, of predestination to salvation or perdition, to life or death, then we may say already that in the election of Jesus Christ which is the eternal will of God, God has ascribed to man the former, election, salvation and life; and to Himself He has ascribed the latter, reprobation, perdition and death.²⁸

What did God elect in the election of Jesus Christ? We have said already that not only did He elect fellowship with man for Himself, but He also elected fellowship with Himself for man. By the one decree of self-giving He decreed His own abandonment to rejection and also the wonderful exaltation and endowment of man to existence in covenant with Himself; that

28. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:162-63.

man should be enriched and saved and glorified in the living fellowship of that covenant.²⁹

In Barth's understanding of election and reprobation, Jesus Christ, electing God and elected man, is the object of both God's judgment and grace. Furthermore, the "Yes" of election and the "No" of reprobation are not symmetrical or equally ultimate. Even the "No" of reprobation, God's election to suffer that condemnation or judgment otherwise due man, serves the purpose of the "Yes" of God's decision to covenant with man in Jesus Christ. For this reason, Barth observes that "the will of God in election is indeed double ... but not dual."³⁰ When we understand election as the act whereby God elects himself to be the man, Jesus Christ, it is no longer possible to view election as equally directed toward the salvation of some human beings and the damnation of others. Such a view fails to recognize that God assumes and suffers the damnation that human beings deserved in order that they might be the recipients of his love and favor. It fails to see that the doctrine of election is the best and most blessed Word that God has spoken or speaks. And the traditional view fails to see this because it does not recognize the way in which reprobation, which God takes upon himself in the reconciling work of Jesus Christ, always serves the gracious purpose of God's election of Jesus Christ for the sake of his people's salvation.

In addition to this primary emphasis upon Jesus Christ as electing God and as elected/reprobated man, Barth develops his doctrine of election under two further headings. The first of these is "the election of the community" in Jesus Christ. Since I will return to this emphasis in the next section, which address Barth's treatment of Romans 9, my summary at this point will be intentionally brief.

By the election of the community, Barth means to refer to the way in which God's act of election in Jesus Christ is "simultaneously" the election of one community, the people of God, through whose existence the grace of God in Christ is attested to the whole world.³¹ Contrary to the tendency of the traditional doctrine of election, which quickly speaks of God's election of specific individuals to salvation, Barth insists that election does not "immediately envisage [*sic*] the election of the individual believer."³² Before we speak of the particular persons or individuals who are elected in Christ, we must speak of the community of believers whose existence is bound up with the person and work of Christ and through whom all human beings are summoned to faith in him. In Barth's understanding, this community whom God elects in Jesus Christ is comprised of two sides or peoples, Israel and the church. Each of these peoples are called to a "pe-

29. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:168.

30. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:171.

31. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:195.

32. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:195.

cular service” in the realization of God’s electing purpose in Christ.³³ On the one hand, Israel is the people whose unbelief and resistance to God’s gracious election testify to God’s judgment upon human sinfulness, which is borne by Jesus Christ in his suffering and death upon the cross. And on the other hand, the church is the people of God whose salvation testifies to God’s grace, and the triumph of his grace in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Through Israel’s unbelief, the passing form of the people of God is attested; and through the church’s calling and salvation, the coming form of the people of God is attested. However, these two sides of the elect community of God are not ultimate, but penultimate. God’s electing grace in Christ will ultimately triumph in the gathering of the one community, comprised of Israel and the church, which will include God’s putting an end to Israel’s unbelief and thereby demonstrating the ultimate powerlessness of sin and evil.³⁴

In the last major section of Barth’s treatment of the doctrine of election, the election of the individual, Barth addresses election in relation to the salvation of individual human beings. While Barth criticizes the tendency of traditional treatments of election to make this the immediate topic of interest, he acknowledges that it has a legitimate place, provided it is treated in the broader framework of God’s election of Jesus Christ and all human beings in him. When viewed from the vantage point of his revised doctrine of election, Barth argues that it is the church’s responsibility to testify to the objective election of all in Christ. The witness of the community to Jesus Christ must correspond to this objective reality, and thus consist of a declaration that in Christ God has elected to covenant with all men. In the proclamation of the gospel, the church is obliged to declare to all that they are elect in Christ, that human rejection of fellowship with God has been rejected in the reprobation that God has assumed on their behalf. The gospel message is a message of grace from first to last, since it tells the truth regarding all human beings as they exist in the election of Jesus Christ and by virtue of his reconciling work.

At this point, one of the most striking and controversial aspects of Barth’s doctrine of election emerges. Consistent with the main tenets of his revised doctrine of election, Barth maintains that God has rejected human unbelief and opposition to God in his act of election in Christ.

The witness of the community of God to every individual man consists in this: that this choice of the godless man is void; that he belongs eternally to Jesus Christ and therefore is not rejected, but elected by God in Jesus Christ; that the rejection

33. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:196.

34. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:259ff.

which he deserves on account of his perverse choice is borne and cancelled by Jesus Christ; and that he is appointed to eternal life with God on the basis of the righteous, divine decision. The promise of his election determines that as a member of the community he himself shall be a bearer of its witness to the whole world. And the revelation of his rejection can only determine him to believe in Jesus Christ as the One by whom it has been borne and cancelled.³⁵

The implications of Barth's position at this point seem clear: all human beings are elected to salvation in Jesus Christ, and therefore any attempt to deny this truth or act as though it were not true is ruled out altogether. For this reason, interpreters of Barth's doctrine of election have invariably raised the question whether or not he teaches a doctrine of "universal salvation" (*apokatastasis pantoon*).³⁶ Undoubtedly, Barth teaches a doctrine of universal election and the reconciliation of all human beings in and through the work of Christ. He also declares human unbelief and rejection of God to have become "void" or impossible by virtue of the truth of what God has determined for man in the election of Jesus Christ. Objectively, all human beings are elected and reconciled to God in Jesus Christ. However, Barth refuses to embrace universalism, even though he describes unbelief and the rejection of election as an "objective impossibility."³⁷ According to Barth, we must resist the temptation of embracing a kind of "historical metaphysics" that presumes to know the ultimate outcome with respect to all human beings.³⁸ Though we should retain a hopeful desire that this may prove to be the case, we nonetheless need to resist venturing a fixed opinion on the question.

2.1.2. Barth's Treatment of Romans 9: Israel's Role in the Election of the Community

Barth treats Romans 9-11 in the second part of his exposition of the doctrine of election, which addresses the topic of the election of the

35. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:306.

36. For critical assessments of the subject of universalism in Barth's doctrine of election, see Williams, *The Election of Grace*, 179-210; G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: The Paternoster Press, 1956), 262-96; Fred Klooster, *The Significance of Barth's Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961), esp. 64-73; Suzanne McDonald, *Re-Imaging Election: Divine Election as Representing God to Others & Others to God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 59-86; Oliver D. Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism: Broadening Reformed Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 151-74. Williams well summarizes the difficulty of interpreting Barth's position: "...after we think we have been soaked for several hundred pages in the claim that all humans are elect willy-nilly, Barth tells us this: 'As he [man] measures himself against God he necessarily judges himself. Unless he accepts this question — however it is answered — he obviously cannot be elect' [CD II/2:511]" (182).

37. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:346.

38. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:417.

community or people of God. Consistent with this location for his interpretation of Paul's argument, especially in Romans 9, Barth accents the respective roles of the two forms or sides of the community, Israel and the church. Furthermore, he develops these respective roles in a way that corresponds closely to the Christological basis of his doctrine of election. Unlike the traditional reading of Roman 9, Barth focuses throughout upon the corporate identity of the people of God as it is represented in Israel and the church. Unlike the traditional reading that emphasizes the particular persons whom God elects to salvation or non-salvation, Barth's interpretation is governed throughout by a consistent emphasis upon the role played in redemptive history by these two forms of the community of God.

The novelty of Barth's exposition of Romans 9-11 can only be explained in terms of his fundamental revision of the traditional doctrine of election. God's self-determination in Christ to be electing God and elected man undergirds every aspect of Barth's exposition of Paul's argument. Since the history of redemption represents the realization in time of God's gracious election in Christ, the respective roles of Israel and the church in this history correspond to the two sides of the one act of God in election: judgment (reprobation) and blessing (election). And since the respective roles of Israel and the church work in tandem to realize God's ultimate intention to covenant with all human beings in Christ, these roles can never frustrate God's gracious purpose to gather one community. Whatever the differences in role and destiny that may be designed by God for Israel and the church, these differences are ultimately overcome in the triumph of God's gracious election in the one community of faith. The election of Israel and the church is an election in and for the sake of Christ, in whom all human beings are elected for covenant with God.

In his treatment of Romans 9-11, which is set forth in a series of lengthy small-print expositions throughout his consideration of the election of the community, Barth distinguishes four topics: 1) Israel and the Church (Rom. 9:1-5); 2) The Judgment and the Mercy of God (Rom. 9:6-29); 3) The Promise of God Heard and Believed (Rom. 9:30-10:21); and 4) The Passing and the Coming Man (Romans 11). Since the first two of these topics are most relevant to the limited focus of this article, I will consider them in some detail. By comparison, my comments on the third and fourth topics will be quite limited, and only provided to illumine what is distinctive to Barth's reading of Romans 9.

In Barth's reading of the opening verses of Romans 9, the sorrow expressed by the apostle Paul testifies to his "solidarity" with Israel. The unbelief of Paul's kinsmen, the Israelites, is the occasion for Paul's sorrow, but it does not represent an irrevocable separation between Paul and Israel. "Even in their unbelief they are and remain his 'brethren.' His faith, the Church's faith in Jesus Christ, unites

him with them.”³⁹ When Paul witnesses the unbelief of his kinsmen, he does not express a sorrow that is born of a despair that they may not be included within the scope of God’s purpose of election and so will not be saved. Paul’s sorrow is born out of his awareness, as an apostle to the Gentiles and a prophet to Israel, that Israel’s present unbelief separates her from the church. Such a separation, however, may not be regarded as final, since it is contrary to the ultimate unity that God intends for the community of faith. Paul’s anguish, which he expresses poignantly in his willingness to be “anathema” for Israel’s sake, is an anguish fueled by his awareness of his calling as an apostle. Since Paul knows that Israel is God’s elect people destined for unity with the church, he desires that Israel should come to know her place in God’s electing purpose as one form of the community of God. For Barth, Paul is giving powerful expression in these verses to his unwillingness to give up on Israel’s destiny as a form of the one community God has elected to save in Jesus Christ. The question in these verses is not about the eternal salvation or non-salvation of some of Paul’s kinsmen, as in the traditional reading of this text by Calvin and others. The question Paul poses has to do with the historical destiny of Israel as the first form of the elect community in the course of the history of redemption. Paul does not lament the loss of salvation on the part of some of his kinsmen; he laments the (temporary) loss on the part of Israel of an awareness of her peculiar place in God’s election of his people.

The solidarity and unity with Israel that Paul expresses in the opening verses of Romans 9 are further evidenced in the way he speaks of “those who are kinsmen according to the flesh.” They remain “Israelites,” and as such members of the same elect community of which Paul considers himself a member. As Barth interprets this language, Paul identifies himself as

a believer and therefore a true Israelite—he is still united and bound to them, so they for their part, in spite of their unbelief, continue to be for him the elected community of God which as such has received for its possession no less than everything on which the faith of the Church is based, from which it draws sustenance, which makes it possible, necessary and real.⁴⁰

For this reason, Paul’s enumeration of the various blessings that accompanied Israel’s election to be the first form of the community of God illustrates how Israel, despite its temporary unbelief, continues to possess everything that is given by God to the church. Even though the church has now come to receive what was first given to

39. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:202.

40. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:203.

Israel, we must not regard this as though Israel's election has changed. What Israel has temporarily lost as the community of God's people is now continued in the new form of God's people, the church. And this temporary loss will eventually be overcome when God's purpose of election in Jesus Christ is realized. The role of the church as the new form of the community of God is not to confirm the death of Israel, or the end of Israel's election. Rather, the church is called to "confess the One who ... does not even, in view of this form of [Israel's] death, cease to be the living Head of the whole community and therefore the hope even of these dead."⁴¹

According to Barth's reading of the opening verses of Romans 9, Paul is not focusing upon the fact that many of his kinsmen are in danger of losing their salvation through their unbelief and squandering of their privileges in the covenant. Paul is focusing upon Israel's uniqueness as the first form of the community of God within the course of the history of redemption in which God's election of all men in Christ is realized. Though he proceeds in his exposition of the remaining portion of Romans 9 to offer an explanation of Israel's peculiar service in bearing witness to Jesus Christ, it is clear that this is Barth's interpretation of Paul's focus. Contrary to the interpretation of Calvin, who regards these verses as a testimony to the fact that many of Paul's contemporaries were separated from God's grace in Christ through their unbelief, Barth regards them to raise the question of Israel's specific service in the history of redemption. The problem that is posed in these verses is the problem of the peculiar destiny of the two forms of the community of God in the history of redemption.

Although this statement of the problem may seem a little vague, what Barth means by speaking of Israel and the church as the two forms of the community of God becomes clearer in his exposition of the following verses in Romans 9. For Barth, Israel and the church together serve to typify what God wills in the election of Jesus Christ. Barth entitles the second part of his treatment of the election of the community, "The Judgement and the Mercy of God," in order to recall his Christocentric definition of election. The election of the community is one that serves typologically to call attention to the two parts of election in Christ: the judgment Christ suffers, as well as the mercy he grants, for the sake of all who are elect in him. The community of God "is elected to serve the presentation (the self-presentation) of Jesus Christ and the act of God which took place in Him."⁴² In this way, the election of the community is an election that serves typologically to point to the one man, Jesus Christ, in whom God has elected himself for judgment and mercy. Just as election has two sides, judgment for God and mercy for the man of God's choosing, Jesus

41. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:205.

42. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:205.

Christ, so the community of God has two sides that represent judgment and mercy.

In the introduction to his treatment of the community of God, Barth provides a remarkable description of what this means for Israel and the church respectively. The peculiar service for which Israel is determined “within the whole of the elected community is to reflect the judgment from which God has rescued man and which He wills to endure Himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.”⁴³ The peculiar service for which the church “as the perfect form of the one elected community is determined, whether Israel obeys its election or not, consists always in the fact that it is the reflection of the mercy in which God turns His glory to man.”⁴⁴ The Christological basis for these distinctive services is even more clearly manifest in the parallel Barth draws between them and Christ’s work of reconciliation: “The Church form of the community stands in the same relation to its Israelite form as the resurrection of Jesus to His crucifixion, as God’s mercy to God’s judgment.”⁴⁵ The two forms of the community of God, accordingly, serve to typify the two sides of God’s election in Christ. In the course of God’s dealings with Israel and the church, Christ’s election to be both reprobate and elect man is represented in the forms of Israel’s judgment for her unbelief and the church’s blessing for her believing response to the gospel promise. Furthermore, just as the two sides of election in Christ, judgment and mercy, are not equally ultimate or symmetrical, so it is in the case of Israel and the church. God’s gracious election is not “Yes” and “No” in equal measure; God’s grace, his free decision to elect man in Christ, ultimately triumphs in the history of Israel and the church. As the first and “provisional” form of the elect community, the true Israel is taken up into the church, the coming and final form of the people of God. But in this transition, Israel is not forgotten. In the final destiny of the elect community, both Israel and the church will be united in the one community of God and the truth of God’s universal purpose of election will be realized.

Barth’s interpretation of Paul’s argument in Romans 9:6-29 is governed by this understanding of the respective roles of Israel and the church in the history of redemption. Rather than interpreting Paul’s distinctions between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau, as though they represented God’s purpose of election in the salvation of some and the non-salvation of others, Barth interprets these distinctions in terms of the peculiar witness of the two forms of the community of God. When Paul responds to the unbelief of many of his fellow Israelites by noting that “not all who descended from Israel belong to Israel” (Rom. 9:6), he means to declare that not

43. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:206.

44. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:210.

45. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:211.

“all bearers of the name Israel, were appointed to become members of the Church. They were certainly appointed members of the one elected community of God. ... But they were not appointed members of the Church hidden in Israel and revealed in Jesus Christ.”⁴⁶ The unbelief of Paul’s Jewish contemporaries witnesses to the “order” of God’s election. Israel’s unbelief, far from removing her from the reach of God’s election, serves to remind us of the unique service of Israel as the first and provisional form of the community of God. There remains “no doubt that as such Abraham’s seed is the elected people of God, determined in accordance with its election *to be the mirror of the divine judgment, which is, for its part, the veil of the divine mercy*. This is God’s order in Israel just because Israel is the elected people.”⁴⁷ For Barth, Paul’s point is that there is “nothing new” about the unbelief of Israel; this is Israel’s service in the course of the history of redemption: to witness to God’s judgment as it serves the purpose of God’s will to show mercy.

The consistency with which Barth follows this interpretive line in his reading of Romans 9 becomes readily apparent in the way he understands Paul’s appeal to the distinction between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau.

In the case of the distinction between Isaac and Ishmael, we have an illustration of the two sides of God’s election of the community. Both Isaac and Ishmael are members of the community of Israel, but they are such in different ways: Isaac testifies to Israel’s election, and Ishmael testifies to Israel’s rejection. The people of Israel are in this respect equally an “elected” and “rejected” people. But Isaac serves to prefigure the new form of the people of God, the church, while Ishmael serves to typify the old form of God’s people in its provisional existence. Even more importantly, Isaac serves peculiarly as a “pre-figuration” of the “Son of God and Man, the proclamation of the divine mercy, the children of Abraham in the sense of v. 7b, the bearers of the spiritual name of his seed.”⁴⁸ The election of Isaac, in distinction from the rejection of Ishmael, repeats and establishes the election of Abraham and the “pre-existent church” that is built up in him. According to Barth, Isaac’s election serves indirectly to witness to the election of all Israel. When Paul adduces the distinction between Isaac and Ishmael, therefore, he does so in order to prove that the Word of God has not proven false, but is established in and through the “unbelieving Synagogue” of Israel. The fact that God has from the beginning differentiated and divided among the people of Israel does not deny Israel’s election to service as the first form of the community of God. This division among the people of Israel testifies

46. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:214.

47. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:214.

48. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:215.

rather to the distinction between God's two peoples, Israel and the Church, and to the continuing significance of Israel's election.

In Barth's view, the same point is made by Paul in his appeal to the typological significance of God's choice of Jacob and not Esau. But in this instance, the insight of Paul into the significance of Israel's election in distinction from that of the church, is even more "acute." Here too the distinction is not between two individuals, one whom God elects to save and another whom he elects not to save, but between two peoples, Israel and the Church. Though there is a real distinction between these two peoples that finds its ground in God's election of the one and not the other, this is not a distinction that involves salvation and damnation. It is a distinction that serves God's election of Israel and the Church to peculiar vocations within the history of redemption. This is evident in the way Barth understands the relationship of both Jacob and Esau to God and to the community of God. In respect to their relationship to God, we must not take the language of Paul in Romans 9:12-13 to mean that the God of Jacob is no longer the God of Esau.⁴⁹ Though God elects Jacob and Esau to different vocations within his purpose of election, he does not do so in order to exclude Esau finally from God's blessing or care as the electing God.

We must not lose sight of the fact that it is in this race that by God's free disposing the Church is founded and built up by the operation of this separation which repeatedly means exclusion. The very fact that the *κατ' ἐκλογὴν πρόθεσις* is continued in this race means that its honour and hope continually benefit all its members. Even its rejected members (just because of the separation which excludes them) are not forsaken, but after, as before, share in the special care and guidance of the electing God.⁵⁰

For Barth, the distinction between Jacob and Esau is not an ultimate distinction that irrevocably removes Esau from the reach of God's mercy. The distinction between them is provisional and will finally serve the purpose of God in demonstration of his name as the one who shows mercy to whom he will. Neither Ishmael nor Esau are ultimately excluded from this demonstration, although they play a distinctive role in testifying to the judgment that God assumes in election for himself in the suffering and cross of Christ. The name of God that is revealed in the words, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy," governs God's conduct toward them as much as it does toward Isaac and Jacob.⁵¹

49. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:217.

50. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:217.

51. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:218.

The illustration of God's election of Jacob and non-election of Esau confirms the point Paul has already made with respect to Isaac and Ishmael. A biblical interpretation of the election of the one and the rejection of the other must be carefully defined. When God rejects Ishmael and Esau, he does so in order to attest the peculiar vocation of Israel as a type of the rejection of Jesus Christ. This rejection does not annul the election of Israel, but indicates that Israel's election was unto their peculiar service, namely, to exhibit the judgment of God that ultimately serves his gracious purpose. And in this way God's Word is once again proven true. "According to Scripture there was always an Israel excluded by this free divine choice. Israel as such was never identical with the Church. Thus the phenomenon of the refractory Synagogue is no novelty. The Word of God is not proven false by this phenomenon."⁵²

Though I will not provide a summary of Barth's remaining treatment of Romans 9-11, it develops under the headings, "The Promise of God Heard and Believed" (Romans 10) and "The Passing and the Coming Man" (Romans 11). In his exposition of these topics, Barth continues to develop his Christological understanding of election in terms of the respective vocations of Israel and the church. Because the vocations of Israel and the church, as the two forms of the community of God, mirror the two sides of election, judgment and mercy, they finally serve to show forth the election and rejection of all in Christ. The twofold determination of election requires that the history of Jesus Christ be mirrored in the history of Israel and the church. When Paul describes the gathering of the believing church in Romans 10, he is describing the vocation of the church in its confirmation of God's electing grace in Christ. And when Paul describes the re-grafting of Israel in Romans 11, he demonstrates that Israel's vocation, though it involves her provisional rejection in service to the gathering of the believing church, will not frustrate God's name in showing mercy to the fullness of the community of God inclusive of Israel and the church. The "specific service" that Israel serves in the purpose of God is "the praise of the mercy of God in the passing, the death, the setting aside of the old man, of the man who resists his election and therefore God."⁵³ The disobedience of Israel is provisional and subordinate to her election. At the conclusion of Paul's treatment of Israel in Romans 11, it becomes clear "that the man [represented by Israel's unbelief and rejection] who resists God is in process of passing, that he must pass in order to receive incorruptible life in peace with God, and that for his salvation he will not be spared this passing—in and with the passing to which God has subjected Himself in His Son."⁵⁴

52. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:217.

53. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:260.

54. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:260.

2.2. The Corporate Election of Israel in Recent Biblical-Theological Interpretations of Romans 9:6-16

Whereas Barth's interpretation of Romans 9 is clearly based upon his reconstructed doctrine of election, a number of recent biblical-theological interpretations of Romans 9 also argue for a corporate election view. These interpretations are not as explicitly based upon theological as they are upon exegetical considerations. Interpreters who take this approach represent a variety of confessional and theological perspectives, and do not therefore fall easily into the historic categories of "Arminian" or "Calvinistic" doctrines of election. Though I will not provide as extensive a summary of their arguments as I have with Barth's interpretation, I will consider three representatives who are illustrative of the corporate-election-of-Israel view.

2.2.1. C.E.B. Cranfield

The first of these interpreters is Charles Cranfield, author of a well-known two-volume commentary on the book of Romans.⁵⁵ Because Cranfield explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to Karl Barth in the interpretation of Romans 9-11, his interpretation provides a good point of transition from Barth's theological exposition to the more exegetical case.

Cranfield entitles his treatment of Romans 9-11, "The Unbelief of Men and the Faithfulness of God." In his introduction to these chapters, he notes that Paul is not inserting an "excursus" into the book of Romans at this point. Rather, the theme of the letter to the Romans is stated in Romans 1:16-17, and this theme focuses upon God's righteousness or faithfulness in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the power of God unto salvation to the Jew first and then to the Greek. When seen against this background, Paul's concern in these chapters is to demonstrate the continuity between the Old Testament history of redemption and the gospel of Jesus Christ. If the gospel of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's dealings with his people Israel, then some account needs to be given of God's continued demonstration of his faithfulness and mercy toward Israel, especially in the face of the apparent unbelief of many of Paul's kinsmen according to the flesh.

After noting the way in which Romans 9-11 fits into the overall theme of the book of Romans, Cranfield makes two observations that are crucial to his reading of Paul's argument. First, we may not separate Romans 9 from the two chapters that follow it, since Paul's interest throughout focuses upon the people of Israel and the way God's word of promise to Israel has not and will not ultimately fail of

55. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans*, 2 vols., *The International Critical Commentary* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979).

its purpose. And second, we must not allow any theme to displace or diminish Paul's accent in these chapters upon God's mercy. The salvation of God's people is entirely based upon God's free mercy, and not upon any human works or achievement. The triumphant note with which Paul concludes his exposition in these chapters of God's faithfulness in the gospel stems from the great theme that dominates the whole: God's mercy will unfailingly be shown to "all peoples," Israel and the Gentiles alike.⁵⁶

In his treatment of the opening verses of Romans 9, Cranfield notes that they introduce the subject of Paul's argument throughout Romans 9-11. He understands Paul's pathos in these verses to express a genuine desire for the salvation of his fellow Jews, many of whom have rejected the gospel of Jesus Christ to which he, as an apostle, is committed. After Paul solemnly declares that he would be willing to be "anathema," to be cut off from fellowship with Christ and the prospect of salvation, for the sake of the salvation of his kinsmen according to the flesh, he affirms God's peculiar mercy and election of Israel as a people. In Cranfield's understanding of Romans 9-11, God's merciful election of Israel as a people is the great issue that Paul endeavors to address throughout these chapters. As he summarizes these verses, "With striking emphasis and solemnity Paul declares his own sorrow at his fellow-Jews' unbelief and the strength of his desire for their conversion, thereby introducing the subject with which he will be concerned until the end of chapter 11."⁵⁷

After identifying the subject that is Paul's preoccupation throughout Romans 9-11, Cranfield treats the remainder of Romans 9:6-29 under the general heading, "the unbelief and disobedience of men are shown to be embraced within the work of the divine mercy."⁵⁸ Two themes stand out in his interpretation of Paul's argument in these verses. First, Paul's distinction between Israel as an elect people and those among this people who are truly "the seed of Abraham," is not to be regarded as an ultimate distinction between some who are non-elect and some who are elect within the purposes of God. By means of this distinction, Paul intends to point out a "characteristic feature of the biblical history," namely, the difference between "those who do, and those who do not, stand in a positive relationship to the accom-

56. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 444: "Paul is here concerned to show that the problem of Israel's unbelief, which seems to call in question the very reliability of God Himself, is connected with the nature of God's mercy as really mercy and as mercy not just for one people but for all peoples; to show that Israel's disobedience, together with the divine judgment which it merits and procures, is surrounded on all sides by the divine mercy" At the close of his introductory comments on Paul's argument in Romans 9-11, Cranfield notes that his interpretation is significantly influenced by Karl Barth's revision of the doctrine of election.

57. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 451.

58. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 470.

plishment of God's purpose"⁵⁹ That some of Paul's contemporaries are unbelieving does not mean that God's electing purpose has failed; this is but an instance of a pattern witnessed throughout the course of redemptive history. And second, Cranfield insists that the dominant theme throughout chapter 9 and following is set forth in verse 15, which is an interpretive key to Paul's entire argument. According to Cranfield, Paul is not arguing that some Israelites were the objects of God's mercy in a way that others were not. Such an interpretation would suggest "an absolute freedom of an indeterminate will of God distinct from His merciful will," and exclude some of the people of Israel from the embrace of God's mercy.⁶⁰ The whole point of Paul's argument in these verses, and in chapters 10 and 11 of Romans, is that all are ultimately embraced by God's mercy. In Cranfield's reading of Paul's argument, "though the roles they fulfill are so sharply contrasted, Ishmael as well as Isaac, Esau as well as Jacob, Pharaoh as well as Moses, the vessels of wrath as well as the vessels of mercy, that is, the mass of unbelieving Jews (and unbelieving Gentiles too) as well as the believing Church of Jews and Gentiles, stand within—and not without—the embrace of the divine mercy."⁶¹

Within the framework of these two themes, Cranfield's interpretation of Paul's reference to God's choice of Isaac rather than Ishmael, and to his choice of Jacob rather than Esau, tracks closely with what we have seen in the case of Barth. According to Cranfield, Paul's interest in both instances is to illustrate a pattern that is evident in the course of redemptive history. Although God has elected Israel as a people, not all of the Israelites have borne witness to God's grace and truth. There is an "Israel within Israel," which is "the company of those who are willing, obedient, grateful witnesses to that grace and truth."⁶² However, the fact that some of the people of Israel have not served to bear witness to God's grace and truth does not mean that their election within God's mercy is annulled. For Cranfield, the differentiation within God's purposes between Jacob and Esau is illustrative of the "historical functions" played by different peoples in the history of redemption. But this differentiation must not be viewed as distinguishing some individuals as destined for salvation, and others for damnation. Since God's mercy is a mercy that embraces all people, the distinct functions played by different peoples in the course of redemptive history must not be viewed as though they meant that God has determined to show mercy to a particular number of persons in distinction from others. In an important comment on Paul's appeal to the distinction between Jacob and Esau, Cranfield argues that

59. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 471.

60. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 472.

61. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 472.

62. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 474.

it is important to stress that neither as they occur in Genesis [Gen. 25:33] nor as they are used by Paul do these words refer to the eternal destinies either of the two persons or of the individual members of the nations sprung from them; the reference is rather to the mutual relations of the two nations in history. What is here in question is not eschatological salvation or damnation, but the historical functions of those concerned and their relations to the development of the salvation-history.⁶³

When Paul appeals to the distinction within the “general area of election” between those who testify gratefully to God’s mercy and those who testify by their unbelief to God’s judgment, he is making the case that the present unbelief of many of his kinsmen follows a pattern demonstrated earlier in the course of redemptive history. But this pattern does not finally or ultimately exclude unbelieving Israelites from the reach of God’s mercy or warrant the premature conclusion that they will not enjoy eschatological salvation.

2.2.2. Paul Achtemeier

While Cranfield’s interpretation of Romans 9 follows closely that of Karl Barth, the interpretation of Paul Achtemeier does not expressly identify any theological pedigree. Achtemeier’s view is set forth in his commentary on the book of Romans, and is fairly representative of modern readings of Romans 9-11.⁶⁴ We shall see that Achtemeier’s interpretation is compatible with the historic Arminian view of predestination, though he does not identify himself with one or the other side of the debate between Arminians and Calvinists. Achtemeier is quite emphatic, however, in expressing his dissatisfaction with Calvin’s reading of Romans 9.

Achtemeier treats Romans 9-11 as the third major section of the book of Romans. Whereas the first and second sections of Romans address God’s lordship in relation to the past (grace and wrath) and the present (grace and law), Achtemeier understands Romans 9-11 as Paul’s treatment of God’s lordship in relation to the future. The particular focus throughout this section of the epistle is upon the place of Israel within God’s gracious plan. Like many interpreters of Romans, Achtemeier believes that the problem posed by Paul in Romans 9—has God’s gracious purpose for his people Israel proven to be a failure by virtue of Israel’s unbelief?—arises naturally within the flow of the book of Romans. Since God’s promise in Jesus Christ is a fulfillment of what was promised Israel in the Old Testament, the un-

63. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 479

64. Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985).

belief of many of Paul's kinsmen prompts Paul to address God's continued purpose and lordship in the salvation of all Israel. The lordship of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ, which Achtemeier regards as the great theme of the entire epistle to the Romans, must be vindicated in the face of the apparent failure of God's purpose to save his people Israel.

According to Achtemeier, Paul's concern in Romans 9 naturally follows from the theme of the book as a whole, and is prompted in the immediate context by the grand conclusion at the end of Romans 8. When Paul breaks forth in praise and thanksgiving for God's invincible love revealed in Jesus Christ, a love from which it is impossible to be separated, he finds himself confronted with the enigma of Israel's unbelief. The "sharp relief" between Paul's praise of God's lordship in salvation and Israel's unbelief, demands a defense of God's triumphant grace also in reference to his purposes for Israel.⁶⁵ As Achtemeier describes Paul's challenge, "if God's word can be defeated by Israel's rejection, then what assurance do we have that God's redemptive word, spoken in Christ, may not also finally fail for us? *That* is the issue Paul is addressing as he laments Israel's rejection in the opening verses of chapter 9."⁶⁶

Before he addresses Paul's initial response to the problem of Israel's unbelief in Romans 9:6-14, Achtemeier makes two significant observations about how the topic of election in general needs to be addressed. First, he observes that Paul is not dealing abstractly with the question of how an individual Christian may have confidence in God's mercy without distrusting "God's redemptive word in Jesus Christ." Paul's immediate concern in Romans 9 lies with "the fate of Israel as chosen people."⁶⁷ The general question of the assurance of an individual's salvation within God's redemptive purpose is not in view. Rather, throughout Romans 9-11 Paul is interested in the specific question of the grace of God in Jesus Christ as it relates to Israel. And second, Achtemeier makes a broad observation about the topic of predestination. According to Achtemeier, it is crucial to remember the difference between the teaching of predestination in Paul's thought and what he terms "predeterminism."

The philosophical notion of predeterminism means that every act and every thought a person has are dictated by forces beyond that person's control. ... That is not what Paul is speaking of when he discusses God's choice of destiny for peoples in chapter 9 (note again, of peoples, not of individuals). Predeterminism allows no room for any free acts. Predestination, on

65. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 153.

66. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 153.

67. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 154.

the other hand, simply sets the final outcome of a process, without determining the route by which it can be reached.⁶⁸

These two observations play a significant role in the way Achtemeier understands Paul's argument in Romans 9. Whatever Paul is teaching, he is not teaching the predestination of particular individuals to salvation, nor is he teaching any form of determinism that denies human freedom in response to the gospel call to faith.

In Achtemeier's interpretation of Paul's distinction between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau, the main point is that Israel's salvation depends upon God's choice and the lordship of his grace in accomplishing his purpose. The existence of a "true Israel" is a fruit of God's gracious choice, "not biological necessity."⁶⁹ "The history of Israel is thus not the history of a race, it is the history of a choice, a choice made by God which includes his intention one day to be gracious to all humanity through Israel."⁷⁰ In the course of redemptive history, God's choice of Israel will not be frustrated, his redemptive word will not fail, despite the unbelief and the resistance offered to his gracious overtures to this people. God's choice of Israel has not failed in the past, and it will not fail in the future. Even the gathering of the church occurs in continuity with Israel, and represents the continuation of God's purpose for the salvation of all human beings in the triumph of his grace at the end of history.

For Achtemeier, there are especially three points that come through clearly in Paul's argument. The first point is that "God is the creator of the world and the ruler of its history and that he therefore disposes over it as sovereign Lord."⁷¹ For this reason, the history of redemption, which involves God's gracious choice of both Israel and the church as his people, moves forward toward its appointed end by God's sovereign lordship. The second point is that the God who superintends redemptive history is "a God of mercy." The crucial failure of the historic, Calvinistic reading of Paul's argument is that it regards God's purpose of mercy and judgment to be "symmetrical," as though it was God's purpose to save some and not others. Grace and

68. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 155. Achtemeier's disjunction between what he terms "the philosophical notion of predeterminism" and "free acts" begs a number of large, difficult questions regarding God's foreordination of all things and human freedom. Though he doesn't address these questions, it appears that he holds to something like the classic Arminian teaching on the freedom of the human will. In this view, all persons have what is sometimes termed a "freedom of indifference" or of "equipose," such that they can choose to respond or not respond to the gospel call to faith. Historically, Calvinists have affirmed a "freedom of spontaneity," namely, the freedom to make choices that are determined by the character of humans as fallen sinners. For Calvinists, fallen sinners have the freedom "to do what they please," but they will never be pleased to do what the gospel commands unless God grants them the disposition and will to do so.

69. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 156.

70. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 156.

71. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 161.

wrath are regarded as equal expressions of God's sovereign choice. But there is no place in Paul's argument, according to Achtemeier, for any such "terrible symmetry between grace and wrath."⁷² God's purpose is exclusively one of mercy that he wishes to show to Israel and the church, and in them to the whole of humanity. The third point in Paul's argument is the corporate nature of the peoples toward whom God chooses to be merciful. "Paul is dealing in this passage with the place of Israel in God's plan of salvation. He is not dealing with the fate of individuals."⁷³ Though Achtemeier acknowledges that God's gracious election has implications for the salvation of individuals, this topic is not Paul's interest in Romans 9. The fact that some individuals, whether Jews or Gentiles, are not saved is due to their free choice to refuse God's mercy in Christ. It is certainly not due in any sense to the fact that some are either not chosen or not in the same way the objects of God's grace and mercy.

2.2.3. Herman Ridderbos

The third illustration of a corporate-election-of-Israel interpretation of Romans 9 is presented by Herman Ridderbos in his influential study, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*.⁷⁴ Ridderbos' treatment of Paul's argument in Romans 9 is of special importance, not only because of his influence in modern biblical studies but also because of his distinctly Reformed commitments. Whereas Cranfield and Achtemeier read Romans 9 from theological perspectives that are expressly revisionist and even hostile toward the historic Reformed interpretation, Ridderbos justifiably enjoys an honored place among more recent Reformed biblical theologians. The fact that Ridderbos also offers a different, more corporate and redemptive-historical, reading of Romans 9, confirms that the interpretive debate regarding Romans 9 is not merely an echo of earlier debates between Arminian and Reformed interpreters of Romans 9-11.⁷⁵

72. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 162.

73. Achtemeier, *Romans*, 163.

74. Trans. John Richard De Witt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975). See also Herman Ridderbos, *Aan De Romeinen, Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament*, ed. S. Greijdanus and F. W. Grosheide (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1959), 203-31. In his commentary (227-31), Ridderbos offers a brief critique of Calvin's interpretation of Romans 9 that corresponds to his comments in his volume on Paul. Though I will primarily refer to his discussion in *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* in the following, I will include comments in the footnotes from his commentary on Romans where they support or develop aspects of his argument.

75. It is interesting that Ridderbos' contemporary and colleague, G. C. Berkouwer, offers an interpretation of Romans 9-11 that similarly emphasizes the salvation-historical focus of Paul's argument. Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, trans. Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 209-17. In his treatment of Paul's argument, Berkouwer approvingly observes that "[i]t is being accepted more and more that this passage is not concerned primarily with establishing a *locus de praedestinatione* as an

Ridderbos takes up the subject of Paul's doctrine of election in Romans 9 in a chapter on "the church as the people of God." For Ridderbos, Paul's doctrine of election touches upon "the deepest foundations of the church."⁷⁶ In the course of Paul's polemics with his Jewish contemporaries, especially those who rejected the claim that Jesus Christ was the promised Messiah and that his church was the new covenant community, he was obliged to address the problem of Israel's unbelief. If all who believe in Christ are recipients of the promises God made to Abraham and his seed, as Paul argues in Romans 4 and Galatians 3, the question becomes inescapable: who are the true heirs of these promises? The enigma of Israel's unbelief, which Paul raises in the most dramatic way at the beginning of Romans 9, is one that Paul must face, and to which he is obliged to give an answer. As Ridderbos understands the argument of Paul, "[h]ere the question as to the true nature of Abraham's seed and of God's election of his people comes up for discussion in a sharply defined manner when in Romans 9-11 Paul sees himself placed before the enigma of Israel unbelieving and therefore excluded from God's promises."⁷⁷ In the face of this enigma, must we conclude that God's promises have failed?

In Ridderbos' understanding of Paul's argument in Romans 9, the "point of departure" for Paul's "profound argumentation" is that the true recipient of the promise to Abraham is not the "natural seed" but "the children of the promise."⁷⁸ When Paul cites the examples of God's choice of Isaac rather than Ishmael, and of Jacob rather than Esau, he aims to emphasize how in the history of redemption the "ground for his election of Israel in no respect lay in any human quality, in the potentialities of human 'flesh,' or in natural descent, but only in his own divine work, in the quickening strength of his promise, in the power of his Spirit."⁷⁹ Paul adduces the cases of Isaac and Jacob in order to show that Israel's election was not based upon Israel's worth or achievement, but upon God who called Israel according to his purpose of election. For Ridderbos, these cases are not adduced by Paul to draw our attention to God's "decree" or "decrees" in his eternal purpose or counsel, but to draw our attention to the way Israel's election in the history of redemption was "not motivated by the object of election" but by "the sovereign, gracious character of God's calling."⁸⁰ While Ridderbos acknowledges that the idea of a sovereign, eternal and antecedent purpose of election belongs to Paul's doctrine of God, he insists that Paul's concern is not abstractly

analysis of individual election or rejection, but rather with certain problems which arise in the history of salvation" (210).

76. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 342.

77. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 343.

78. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 343.

79. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 343.

80. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 344.

focused upon God's sovereign choice of some persons to salvation and of others to damnation. Paul's concern is to show how Israel's election was never based upon works, but always upon God's grace that is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

After Ridderbos identifies what he terms the "point of departure" for Paul's argument, he proceeds to offer several objections to the way it has been treated in the history of Christian theology, especially in the Augustinian/Calvinistic tradition.

The first objection that Ridderbos raises to the traditional reading is relevant to the debate regarding individual or corporate election in Romans 9. According to Ridderbos, we should not interpret Paul's reference to Isaac and Jacob as the peculiar objects of God's purpose of election to be a reference to God's decree of election and reprobation that determines their "eternal personal destiny."⁸¹ Since Paul appeals in the case of Jacob and Esau to Malachi 1:2ff., which in its original context referred to two peoples rather than two individuals, his point is not to affirm a doctrine of individual election and reprobation. Rather, when Paul uses the language of God's "purpose of election," he does so in a way that reflects the "original" use of this language in Scripture, namely, to describe God's gracious choice in calling Israel to himself "out of all peoples, having placed it on his side in distinction from those others."⁸² The election of Israel was based, not upon Israel's "excellence" in distinction from other peoples, but upon the "sovereign, gracious character of God's calling of Israel, not motivated by the object of election."⁸³ The predominant motif in the entirety of Paul's argument throughout Romans 9 and following is the contrast between grace and works, between God's merciful election of his people Israel and this people's unworthiness.

While Ridderbos affirms that God's election of his people Israel finds its source in the pre-temporal counsel of God, he takes pains to argue that this counsel must not be viewed abstractly or formally. God's purpose of election in Paul's argument is viewed from the perspective of Israel's place in the history of redemption, not simply in terms of "a decree of God that only later comes to realization."⁸⁴

81. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 344n39. Cf. Ridderbos, *Romeinen*, 228: "Evenzo, wanneer de apostel in vs. 10 e.v. over Ezau en Jacob spreekt en het onderscheiden lot, dat beiden te beurt viel, herleidt tot het verkiezend voornemen Gods, vs. 11, dan mag men deze 'verkiezing' niet uit het oorspronkelijk verband van Gen. losmaken en identificeren met de persoonlijke praedestinatie van Jacob tot zaligheid en van Ezau tot verdoemenis, als overanderlijk raadsbesluit Gods. Paulus spreekt daarvan met geen woord."

82. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 344. Cf. Ridderbos, *Romeinen*, 228: "Evenzo zijn in het citaat uit Mal. 1 Jacob en Ezau zeer duidelijk niet slechts als enkele personen, maar tezamen met de uit hen voortgekomen volkeren bedoeld. Ook spreekt de profeet hier niet van de persoonlijke praedestinatie van Jacob ad salute en van Ezau ad damnationem, doch van de vrijmachtige beschikking, krachtens welke God in de geschiedenis des heils zijn volk Israël gezegend en bewaard en het volk van Edom heeft prijsgegeven aan verwoesting en ondergang."

83. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 344.

84. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 347.

While Ridderbos acknowledges that Paul's doctrine of election is shaped by the "basic biblical notion that all things in heaven and earth come to pass according to the antecedent counsel and intention of God," he sharply criticizes an approach to election that deals with "formal concepts" rather than with the way God has revealed himself in his saving acts throughout the course of the history of redemption.⁸⁵ Rather than speaking formally of God's decree or decrees, Paul speaks concretely of the church's election in Christ as this is revealed in the gospel and as it comes to expression in the gathering of his people. What we know of God's grace and mercy in Jesus Christ finds its basis in God's "actual appropriation of the church to himself before the foundation of the world."⁸⁶ The principal burden of Paul's argument is that the church was "already united with the pre-existent Christ and thus chosen by God in him" before the church was gathered in the course of history.⁸⁷

Within the setting of his criticism of a formal understanding of God's decree of election, Ridderbos also objects to the traditional argument that Paul's argument in Romans 9 (and elsewhere) warrants the claim that God's purpose of election involves a "fixed" number of persons who are elect in distinction from others who are non-elect. The significance of Ridderbos' criticism of the traditional view at this point is evident in the following comment:

This fixed character does not rest on the fact that the church belongs to a certain "number," but that it belongs to Christ, from before the foundation of the world. Fixity does not lie in a hidden *decretum*, therefore, but in *the corporate unity of the church with Christ*, whom it has come to know in the gospel and has learned to embrace in faith. It is therefore a *metabasis eis allo genos*, a crossing over from the economy of redemption revealed and qualified in Christ to a causal predestinarianism abstracted from it, when one chooses to reduce the links of this golden chain fundamentally to one thing only, that only they will inherit glory who have been foreknown and predestined by God to that end.⁸⁸

While this comment is offered as a summary of Paul's doctrine of election, not only in Romans 9 but also elsewhere (e.g. Rom. 8:29-30), it expresses clearly Ridderbos' criticism of the traditional understanding of what Paul means by God's "purpose of election" in this passage.

85. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 348.

86. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 347.

87. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 347.

88. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 351 (emphasis mine).

3. Revisiting Romans 9:6-16: Corporate and Individual Election

Now that I have surveyed several different interpretations of Romans 9 that are critical of the traditional reading of this passage, I wish to revisit Paul's argument in Romans 9:6-16. While I do not intend to provide a complete exegesis of this passage, I am interested in whether or not the recent trend to interpret this passage in a corporate-election-of-Israel fashion represents a more cogent reading of Paul's case than the traditional interpretation of Calvin and others in the Augustinian tradition. I will begin with a few observations regarding the occasion and place of Romans 9 in the book of Romans generally and in Romans 9-11 in particular. Thereafter, I will address several key questions that bear upon the issue of corporate versus individual election in this passage.

3.1. The Occasion and Place of Romans 9: Has God's Word Failed?

While it is often alleged that the traditional reading of Romans 9 abstracts Paul's understanding of election from the broader focus of Romans 9-11, this allegation is overstated. In Calvin's comments on the opening verses of Romans 9 (vv. 1-5), for example, the "abruptness" with which Paul introduces the subject of Israel's place in God's redemptive plan is regarded as only apparent. According to Calvin, there is a clear rationale for Paul's introduction of the problem of Israel's unbelief in response to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since Paul introduces the epistle to the Romans with a thematic declaration of the power of the gospel unto salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greek, he is obliged to take up the problem of Israel's unbelief. And he does so in order to demonstrate that the righteousness of God, which is revealed in the gospel of Jesus Christ from faith to faith (Rom. 1:17), confirms the promises that were made to Abraham and his seed. Throughout the preceding chapters of Romans, Paul repeatedly notes the privileges that distinguished Israel from the Gentiles in the course of redemptive history. He also adduces the example of Abraham's faith in response to the promise of God as typical of the kind of faith with which the promises of God in Christ are to be received (Rom. 4:13ff.). Paul's apostleship, as a minister of Christ to both Jews and Gentiles alike, requires that he give extended consideration to the challenge posed by Israel's present unbelief to the claim that Christ is the one in whom God's redemptive promise to Israel is now being proclaimed to all.⁸⁹

89. Calvin, *Comm Rom.* 190: "His reason for such a course is this. He has completed the treatment of the doctrine which he was discussing, and when he turns his attention to the Jews, he is astonished at their unbelief as if it were something unnatural, and suddenly bursts into protest, as if he were dealing with a subject which he had previously treated. There was no one who would not automatically entertain the

If there is one point of agreement in both the traditional and more recent interpretations of Romans 9, it is that Paul's argument in this chapter is the first part of a more extended argument that runs through chapters 10 and 11. Far from representing a kind of intrusion or departure from the themes that have preoccupied Paul throughout the opening chapters of Romans, Romans 9-11 address an inescapable problem confronting Paul's apostleship: how can the gospel of Jesus Christ be what Paul declares it to be, when the people of Israel to whom the promises of this gospel were first given do not respond to it in the way of faith? The question of God's gracious purpose in Christ in relation to the people of Israel is one that Paul must address, not merely to authenticate his apostleship but to authenticate the power of the gospel he proclaims. On this point, there is little or no disagreement between traditional and more recent interpreters of the issue Paul addresses in Romans 9 and following. Whatever differences may exist on the question of corporate or individual election in Romans 9, these differences do not necessarily determine how we should understand Paul's concern in the opening section of this chapter. It is generally agreed, even among the more recent interpreters of Romans 9 we have considered, that Paul is focused upon the question whether or not the unbelief of his contemporaries shows that the Word and promise of God have failed in their case.

Despite the general consensus on the occasion and place of Romans 9 in the book of Romans, Barth's view of the problem posed by Paul at the outset of Romans 9 differs significantly from both Calvin and the other interpreters we have surveyed. In Barth's view, Paul does not express a sorrow in these verses born out of concern that some of his fellow Jews are in real danger of losing their salvation. Nor does Paul speak of a willingness to be "anathematized" for the sake of unbelieving Israel out of a willingness to suffer the loss of his own salvation for Israel's sake. Paul's sorrow in these verses expresses his sense of *unity* with Israel, not his sense of being *separated* from them as one who through faith in Christ is a recipient of God's grace. For Barth, Israel's unbelief is provisional and alterable; it does not threaten ultimately to separate Israel from God's merciful election. Barth insists that, in the final analysis, Israel's unbelief "cannot succeed. Even in their unbelief they are and remain his [Paul's] 'brethren.'"⁹⁰ Upon the basis of his Christological revision of the doctrine of election, Barth maintains the ultimate unity of Israel and the church in the election of Jesus Christ, and stresses the typological function of Israel's unbelief as a witness to Christ's willingness to suffer judgment and loss in order to show mercy to all. Whereas Cal-

thought, 'If this is the doctrine of the law and the prophets, how does it happen that the Jews so obstinately reject it?'"

90. *Church Dogmatics*, II/2:202.

vin views Israel's unbelief in soteriological terms (will Paul's fellow Israelites be saved?), Barth views Israel's unbelief in terms of the function Israel serves as a form of the community of God in the history of redemption. Within the framework of Barth's doctrine of the election of the community of God—first in the provisional form of Israel and thereafter in the form of the church—the opening verses of Romans 9 already show that Paul is not focusing upon the salvation or non-salvation of individuals.

Although it would be premature to reject Barth's interpretation of Romans 9 at this point, his handling of the opening verses of the chapter offers an unlikely account of what occasions Paul's sorrow. The language Paul uses in these verses, as is generally noted by commentators, including some who hold to a corporate-election-of-Israel view, suggests that Paul does fear that the unbelief of many of his kinsmen threatens them with the loss of salvation through Christ.⁹¹ When Paul speaks of his willingness to be "cut off from Christ," he is drawing a comparison by way of contrast between himself and his unbelieving fellow Jews. Rather than allow his kinsmen to be condemned for their separation from Christ, Paul expresses in the most poignant and remarkable way his readiness to lose what is of ultimate importance for their sake. What is at stake is nothing less than salvation through Christ on the one hand, or condemnation apart from Christ on the other. The fact that many of his fellow Israelites, who were the first beneficiaries of God's covenant favor and grace, are in danger of condemnation and loss, prompts Paul to respond the way he does in verse 6: "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." The inference that might be drawn from Israel's unbelief and separation from Christ, namely, that the Word of God has proven ineffectual in their case, must be forthrightly rejected and shown to be false.

The occasion for Paul's argument in Romans 9, therefore, is the soteriological question of the salvation or non-salvation of his fellow Israelites. Paul's interest in this and the following chapters of Romans is to pursue the issue of God's saving intention with respect to the people of Israel. Barth's attempt to view Paul's argument solely in terms of Israel's peculiar vocation in the history of redemption fails to account adequately for the sorrow Paul expresses at the outset of Romans 9.

91. See Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 457-58; Achtemeier, *Romans*, 155-59; and Ridderbos, *Romeinen*, 204-9. Remarkably, although Cranfield closely follows Barth's reading of Romans 9-11, he differs from Barth in his interpretation of Romans 9:1-5. For example, in his comments on verse 3, Cranfield notes that "[n]othing less than the eschatological sentence of exclusion from Christ's presence (cf. Mt 7.23; 25.41) is involved" (458).

3.2. Election to Salvation or Service?

If the concern that Paul expresses in Romans 9:1-5 has to do with the salvation or non-salvation of his unbelieving kinsmen, this has major implications for the question whether in verses 6-16 Paul is only adducing the cases of Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, to illustrate the service or vocation that the people of Israel performed according to God's purpose of election throughout the course of redemptive history. Among the interpreters whom I have considered, both Barth and Cranfield are quite emphatic that Paul is not speaking of the salvation of particular persons in these verses, but of the "destiny" or "vocation" of Israel within the will of God. For Barth, Paul's purpose is to distinguish between the vocation of Israel and the vocation of the church as the two forms of the community of God. Whereas Israel in her unbelief typifies the judgment of God that is borne by Christ in his work of reconciliation, the church in her believing response to the gospel typifies the mercy of God that is expressed in Christ's election of a community into fellowship with God. Neither of these respective vocations directly speaks to the issue of the salvation of some individuals and the non-salvation of others. Cranfield, whom as we have seen follows closely Barth's reading of Romans 9-11, likewise interprets Paul's argument in terms of the historical destiny of Israel and the church.

It is important to stress that neither as they occur in Genesis nor as they are used by Paul do these words refer to the eternal destinies either of the two persons [Jacob and Esau] or of the individual members of the nations sprung from them; the reference is rather to the mutual relations of the two nations in history. What is here in question is not eschatological salvation or damnation, but the historical functions of those concerned and their relations to the development of salvation-history.⁹²

There are two insuperable problems with the claims of Barth and Cranfield at this point. The first of these problems relates to what we have already noted about Paul's sorrow in Romans 9:1-5. If Paul's concern in these opening verses focuses upon the salvation or the non-salvation of many of his fellow Israelites, the argument he musters from Romans 9:6 through Romans 11 must be addressed to this concern. Otherwise, Paul's argument would be a remarkable case of theological shadow-boxing. He would not be addressing the problem identified in the opening section of Romans 9, and to which he now aims to provide a resolution. However, when his argument is viewed against the backdrop of the question raised at the outset of Romans

92. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 479.

9, the whole point of Paul's exposition of God's purpose of election throughout this section of Romans is to show that God's Word has not failed (and will not fail) to accomplish its purpose in the salvation of those who are the recipients of his sovereign mercy and grace. It is remarkable that Cranfield, after acknowledging that Paul is focusing upon the question of the salvation of his fellow Israelites, nonetheless maintains that Paul's interest in Romans 9:6ff. is only focused upon the "historical function" of Israel in the realization of God's plan of redemption. This is remarkable in view of Cranfield's admission that Paul does raise the issue of the salvation of many of his fellow Israelites at the beginning of Romans 9.

The second problem with Barth and Cranfield's claim that Paul is enlarging only upon the historical vocation of Israel in the history of redemption, is contextual. In the larger context of Paul's argument in Romans 9-11, it becomes apparent that he is indeed addressing the issue of "eschatological salvation or damnation," to use Cranfield's language. Paul is not restricting his interest to the function Israel played in the history of redemption. Nor is he restricting his comments to general or non-salvific privileges that Isaac may have enjoyed rather than Ishmael, or Jacob may have received but not Esau. This can be demonstrated in several ways.

For example, at several points in Paul's argument in Romans 9:6-29, he uses language that clearly implies a distinction between some persons who are saved and others who are not saved. Within the setting of the book of Romans, this language cannot fairly be viewed as referring to anything less than "salvation" and "non-salvation" in the ultimate sense of these terms. In Romans 9:6-9, a distinction is drawn between all who belong to the people of Israel as descendants of Abraham and some who are truly "children of the promise" (τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας) or "children of God" (τέκνα τοῦ θεοῦ). In Paul's writings, these expressions commonly refer to those among the children of Abraham who are genuinely recipients of God's gracious promise of salvation in Christ (e.g., Rom. 8:16, 21; Phil. 2:15; Gal. 4:28).⁹³ Perhaps even more telling is the way Paul goes on to describe God's purpose of election with respect to the twin sons of Rebecca and Isaac, Jacob and Esau. According to Paul, "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 his call (οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦντος)—she was told, 'The older will serve the younger'" (Rom. 9:11). In this description, Paul adduces God's purpose to show mercy to the younger rather than the older, to confirm that God's call and grace are not granted "because of works" (οὐκ ἐξ ἔργων). Within the argument of the book of Romans as a whole, this kind of language clearly implies that Paul is speaking about the salvation of the one to whom God shows mercy

93. See Schreiner, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation?," 92.

and the non-salvation of the one to whom God does not show mercy. An attentive reader of Romans in particular, or Paul's epistles in general, would immediately recall Paul's emphasis upon the justification of believers by faith "apart from works" or "the works of the law" (e.g. Rom. 3:20, 27-28; 4:2, 6; 9:32; 11:6; Gal. 2:16; 3:2, 5, 10; Eph. 2:9; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 3:5). Furthermore, it is telling to observe that later in Romans 9, in the section immediately after Paul's reference to Jacob and Esau, Paul speaks of some who are "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" (Rom. 9:22, σκεύη ὀργῆς κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπώλειαν) and of others who are "vessels of mercy, which he [God] has prepared beforehand for glory" (Rom. 9:23, σκεύη ἐλέους ἃ προητοίμασεν εἰς δόξαν).

Although it takes us beyond the scope of our focus in this article, it is also instructive to observe how throughout Romans 10-11 Paul repeatedly makes clear that he is dealing with the theme of salvation in the strict sense, not general blessings that are extended to all without exception. After closing the first main part of his argument in Romans 9, Paul notes that the prophet Isaiah foretold that "only a remnant of them [the sons of Israel in general] will be saved" (Rom. 9:27, τὸ ὑπόλειμμα σωθήσεται). In chapter 10, after Paul expresses his heartfelt prayer to God and desire that his fellow Israelites might be "saved" (verse 1), he enlarges upon the reason for their failure to obtain salvation. This failure stems from their unwillingness to believe in Jesus Christ. Because many of his fellow Israelites have not believed the gospel Word, they have cut themselves off from Christ and the promise of salvation in him. Thereafter in chapter 11, Paul expands upon the way the unbelief of Israel was the occasion within God's gracious purpose for the gospel to be extended to the Gentiles. And he argues further that the engrafting of the Gentiles into the "olive tree" of God's people will in turn provoke Israel to jealousy, and that this will issue in the salvation ultimately of "all Israel" (Rom. 11:26).⁹⁴ Even though the interpretation of Paul's argument, especially the meaning of the expression "all Israel," is notoriously difficult, and much disputed among commentators on the book of Romans, for our purposes the point is clear: throughout the entirety of Paul's argument as it is unfolded in Romans 9-11, the question of God's purpose of election in respect to Israel and the Gentiles is a question that has everything to do with their salvation or non-salvation. It is not merely a question of the respective role or destiny of the people of Israel or the church in the course of redemptive history.

94. For a treatment of the debate regarding the meaning of Romans 9:26, including a summary of various interpretations, see Cornelis P. Venema, "In this Way All Israel Will Be Saved: A Study of Romans 11:26," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 22 (2011): 19-40. Though I do not agree with Calvin's understanding of this passage, this does not require any substantial disagreement with Calvin's reading of Romans 9.

3.3. Corporate or Individual Election

If Paul in Romans 9:6-16 is addressing the issue of the salvation of those who are truly “children of Abraham,” the peculiar recipients of the gracious promise of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the specific question that remains to be addressed is this: are these recipients a corporate people or group, whether Israel or the church? Or are they specific individuals from among a larger body of persons toward whom God has chosen to be merciful? Using the language of Paul in this passage, are we to understand his references to God’s choice of Isaac rather than Ishmael, or of Jacob rather than Esau, to be references to the destiny of two peoples or of two individuals? Or to put the question in terms of the handling of this passage by Calvin, who takes Paul to be referring to individuals rather than peoples, and more recent interpreters like Barth and others, who take Paul to be referring to peoples rather than individuals—is the Augustinian/Calvinistic reading of this passage to be preferred above the corporate-election-of-Israel reading of more recent authors?

In my judgment, there are several aspects of Paul’s argument in Romans 9:6-16 that require the idea of God’s gracious choice to save some individual persons from among a larger body or corporate people. For this reason, the position of Barth and others—that Paul is merely speaking of God’s purpose to elect a distinct people or group of people for a particular purpose in redemptive history—must be rejected. Calvin’s insistence that this passage teaches the election of particular individuals is exegetically warranted. However, I also believe that Paul’s argument cannot be adequately treated solely in individual terms. There are broad features of God’s purpose of election in the course of redemptive history, specifically his abiding purpose to show mercy to “all Israel,” that remain an integral part of Paul’s interest in the entirety of the argument in Romans 9-11. When properly defined, it is permissible to affirm both the individual and corporate features of Paul’s doctrine of election, without losing the inescapably particular and specific identity of those persons whom God is pleased to save in Christ, whether from among the people of Israel or the Gentiles. Due to the complexity of these issues, I will develop my case by way of several observations.

First, the whole of Paul’s argument in Romans 9:6-16 depends upon the validity of the distinction that he draws between Israel as an elect people and the *true* Israel. In order to prove that God’s Word to Israel has not failed, Paul notes the difference between the election of Israel to covenant privilege and the election of some within Israel to salvation. This difference is described as a difference between *elect Israel* and *the elect of Israel*, the children of Abraham *by natural descent* and the children of Israel *according to God’s purpose of election*. The distinction Paul makes throughout the course of his argument in Romans 9 answers the question posed by Israel’s unbelief, namely,

whether or not the Word of God has failed in their case. Because God's Word has proven fruitful in the case of *the elect remnant* within Israel, it is impossible to charge God with failure because of the unbelief of many among the Israelites. The significance of this fundamental feature of Paul's argument with respect to the question of corporate or individual election, is transparent: if Isaac and Jacob are not representatives of those among the larger company of Israelites in whom God's purpose of election is realized, then Paul's answer to his problem would amount to nothing more than a restatement of it! In this case, Paul's answer would say no more than that God has elected to save the people of Israel, and that his unbelieving kinsmen are from this people. This would offer no solution to the problem of the unbelief of Paul's kinsmen, since the corporate election of Israel is *the specific occasion* for Paul's argument in Romans 9:6-16, not its resolution.⁹⁵

Second, the distinction Paul makes between elect Israel and the elect of Israel, between the children of Abraham by natural descent and the children of Abraham according to God's promise, is also important for sorting out the implications of Paul's appeal to the distinction between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau. Advocates of the corporate-election-of-Israel position commonly note that the Old Testament passages to which Paul refers (Gen. 21:12 and Mal. 1:1-5; cf. also Gen. 25:33) clearly refer to corporate peoples or nations. Paul's appeal to these passages may not, therefore, lose sight of the broader, historical-redemptive references to God's dealings with the peoples of Israel and Edom that are part of the meaning of these passages in their original setting. Since the distinction between Jacob and Esau in the Old Testament is a distinction between two peoples, Paul's appeal to this distinction must likewise be regarded as a distinction between two corporate peoples, elect Israel and non-elect Edom.

While it is undeniable that the two individuals, Jacob and Esau, are closely linked in the history of redemption with two peoples, it is most important to consider why Paul in this instance appeals to God's merciful choice of Jacob instead of Esau. In the interpretation of Paul's argument in Romans 9, priority has to be given to the way Paul appeals to Malachi's prophecy, not to its meaning solely in terms of its original Old Testament setting.⁹⁶ Since Paul uses the ex-

95. Cf. Murray, *Romans*, 2:18: "His [Paul's] answer would fail if it were simply an appeal to the collective, inclusive, theocratic election of Israel. Such a reply would be no more than appeal to the fact that his kinsmen were Israelites and thus no more than a statement of the fact which, in view of their unbelief, created the problem."

96. A similar point can be made regarding Paul's use of Hosea 2:23 and 1:10 in Romans 9:25-26. Although the point Paul makes in his use of Hosea is not materially different than the point made in the original context of the prophecy of Hosea (God's unmerited love is an amazing demonstration of his grace), he does use Hosea's words in a way that is peculiar to his own argument in Romans 9. Just as God graciously

ample of Jacob and Esau to make a point regarding God's purpose of election, which distinguishes between those who are true children of the promise and those who are not, it is impossible to deny the particularity of God's choice of Jacob, the younger of the twin sons of Isaac and Rebecca. Undoubtedly, God's merciful choice of Jacob has implications for his purpose with respect to all who belong to the true Israel. This was true in the Old Testament history, and it remains true, as Paul argues more extensively throughout the entirety of Romans 9-11. But the purpose of God in the salvation of all the elect from among the people of Israel more generally can only be understood, when it is recognized that this purpose issues in the salvation of specific persons to whom God is pleased to show his mercy.⁹⁷ When Paul adduces the example of God's choice of Jacob, he reinforces what he has already established in the case of Isaac. Because God's Word has always been effective unto salvation in the case of those who are the recipients of God's mercy according to his purpose of election, God's promises to the people of Israel are not void or ineffectual. Just as the distinction between Isaac and Ishmael is grounded in God's gracious choice, so the distinction between Jacob and Esau illustrates the sheer graciousness of God's undeserved mercy toward those whom he saves. In the case of Jacob and Esau, because they were twin sons of one father and distinguished within God's purpose of election before they were born, this point becomes most clear.

And third, the usual way in which the choice between corporate election and individual election is posed in interpretations of Romans 9, needs to be more carefully analyzed. In my reading of Paul's argument in Romans 9, I have thus far stressed the inescapably specific or individual nature of God's purpose of election. When Paul speaks of God's choice with respect to Isaac and Jacob, he is speaking of specific persons from among a larger group, the elect nation of Israel, upon whom God sets his saving mercy in Christ. However, there is no conflict between affirming the election of specific persons and the election of a community or people, provided the latter is properly defined.⁹⁸ In the broader context of Paul's argument in Romans 9-11,

called Israel to be his people, so he now graciously calls the Gentiles to salvation and incorporation into the number of his people.

97. Cf. Moo, *Romans*, 585-86: "I believe that Paul is thinking mainly of Jacob and Esau as individuals rather than as nations and in terms of their own personal relationship to the promise of God rather than of their roles in carrying out God's plan. The nations denoted by these names, we must remember, have come into existence in and through the individuals who first bore those names. In a context in which Paul begins speaking rather clearly about the individuals rather than the nations, we should be surprised that he would apply a text that spoke of the nations to the individuals who founded and, in a sense 'embodied' them. It is not the issue of how God uses different individuals or nations in accomplishing his purposes that is Paul's concern, but which individuals, and on what basis, belong to God's covenant people."

98. In fairness to Calvin, it must be observed that he recognizes the legitimate sense in which the election of Jacob was not merely individual, but the election of a people in

those whom God saves in virtue of his purpose of election are described by Paul as “a remnant” from among the larger community of the people of Israel (Rom. 9:27). When Paul describes God’s dealings with his people Israel throughout the Old Testament epoch, he notes how this history always proceeded in a way that confirmed the power of God’s Word to save those whom he purposed to save. For example, in Romans 11:5-6, he says: “So too at the present time, there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (οὕτως οὖν καὶ ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ λείμμα κατ’ ἐκλογὴν χάριτος γέγονεν. εἰ δὲ χάριτι, οὐκέτι ἐξ ἔργων, ἐπεὶ ἡ χάρις οὐκέτι γίνεται χάρις). Even though what Paul means toward the end of Romans 11, where he speaks of the eschatological salvation of “all Israel” and of the large embrace of God’s mercy toward “all” (11:32), is open to debate, it is evident that he does not view the election of particular persons from among the people of Israel in a way that denies God’s great purpose to save an elect community. The reach of God’s mercy in Christ will ultimately embrace the fullness of a community of persons, both Jews and Gentiles, whom God will save according to his gracious purpose. The implication of the broader argument in Romans 9-11 is that God’s mercy will be extended, not merely to a few persons here and there who constitute a remnant chosen from a larger group, but to a great number of persons who will be brought into the one community of Christ or “olive tree.” For Paul, there is no conflict between an affirmation of the particular election of individual persons and the gathering of a world-wide church or community of Jews and Gentiles alike who are all the recipients of God’s undeserved mercy.⁹⁹

When interpreters of Romans 9 argue for a corporate-election-of-Israel view, they fail to recognize the insoluble problems such a view presents. When Barth affirms a doctrine of election in Christ that is objectively universal both in the eternal self-determination of Christ

him. Cf. Calvin, *Comm. Rom.* 9:13, 202, where he acknowledges that the conferral of the birthright upon Jacob is regarded in Malachi 1 as a declaration of the Lord’s “kindness to the Jews.” Cf. also Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.7 (*Calvini opera selecta*, ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel [München: Kaiser, 1926-52], 4:377-78): “The statement ‘I have loved Jacob’ applies to the whole offspring of the patriarch, whom the prophet there contrasts to the posterity of Esau. *Still this does not gainsay the fact that there was set before us in the person of one man an example of election that cannot fail to accomplish its purpose*” (emphasis mine).

99. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2: *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 404, offers a helpful statement of the consistency between an affirmation of God’s merciful election of specific persons and his election of the organic unity of a new humanity in Christ: “So it is not a random aggregate of things but an organic whole that is known by God in election and saved by Christ’s redemption. ... Precisely because the object of election is a perfect organism, election itself can only be conceived as a fixed and specific decree of God. In an aggregate the number of its parts is totally immaterial. But an organism must by its very nature be based on measure and number. God chose Christ to be the head, and the church as his body; together they must grow into a fully mature ‘person,’ in whom every member has his or her own place and fulfills his or her own role.”

and in the history of Christ's work of reconciliation, he is compelled to deny that Paul's argument in Romans 9 has anything more in view than the peculiar vocation of Israel within the purposes of God. He is also obliged to deny that Paul anywhere teaches that God's mercy discriminates between persons or involves the choice of some for salvation and not others. In this Barth is quite consistent, and his reading of Romans 9 follows closely his basic revision of the doctrine of election. The problem with Barth's interpretation, however, is that Paul is not simply speaking about Israel's vocation in Romans 9, nor is he offering a doctrine of election that makes no distinction between those whom God chooses to save and those whom he chooses not to save.

But it is not only Barth's view of corporate election in Romans 9 that is problematic. In the arguments of Cranfield, Achtemeier, and to a lesser extent, Ridderbos, the emphasis upon the corporate nature of God's purpose of election leads, ironically, to an abstract or formal view of the objects of God's electing choice. Even if it is granted that the persons whom God elects comprise a community, it makes no sense to speak of this community in the abstract. At no point throughout the extended argument of Paul in Romans 9-11 are we dealing with nameless persons, or with an indefinite concept of the community of God.¹⁰⁰ In Romans 9, Paul speaks of "Isaac" and "Ishmael," of "Jacob" and "Esau," of those who are "vessels of mercy" and those who are "vessels of wrath." In Romans 9:15, the personal pronoun is used twice to identify the one who is shown mercy and the one who is not. In the description of the failure of many of his fellow Israelites to believe in Romans 10, Paul describes real persons who are not obtaining salvation through faith in Christ, and who are not numbered among the "remnant" of those who will be saved. And in Romans 11, Paul's language continues to describe those who are brought to salvation through faith in Christ by virtue of God's purpose to show them mercy. None of these descriptions is compatible with a basic assumption of the corporate election view, namely, that

100. Schreiner, "Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election Unto Salvation?," 102: "[T]hose who advocate corporate election do not stress adequately enough that God chose a group of people, and if he chose one group of people (and not just a concept or an abstract entity) rather than another group, then the corporate view of election does not make God any less arbitrary than the view of those who say God chose certain individuals." I concur with Schreiner's point that it does not make sense to speak of the election of a group, if this group is not composed of any particular persons but is simply an abstraction whose identity remains indefinite. Schreiner offers the analogy of someone who chooses to purchase a professional baseball team (say, the Minnesota Twins or the Los Angeles Dodgers), without at the same time obtaining the team's players or roster (permitting anyone to join the team that wishes to do so). The problem here is not solved by emphasizing (as Ridderbos does, for example) that Paul's argument focuses upon the history of redemption rather than the salvation of individuals in history. Expressed theologically, *historia salutis* does not diminish *ordo salutis*, but provides its basis and context.

God's purpose of election does not involve his merciful choice of specific individuals.

3.4. Two Theological Issues

In the final analysis, the objections to the view that Paul teaches the election of specific individuals to salvation in Romans 9 are not so much exegetically driven as they are based upon broader theological commitments. While this is quite clear in the case of Barth's reading of Romans 9, it is evident as well in the comments on this passage by Cranfield, Achtemeier, and Ridderbos. Though I will not consider all of the reasons these theologians prefer a corporate-election-of-Israel interpretation, there are two that stand out.

The first of these broader theological commitments is the insistence that God's purpose of election is, both in its embrace and aim, solely to show mercy toward all persons. The basis for the emphasis upon the corporate election view is the assumption that God's mercy must triumph over his justice in respect to his purpose of election. For Barth, Cranfield, and Achtemeier, God's mercy toward all, Jew and Gentile alike, is the dominant, even exclusive, theme that governs the entire argument of Paul in Romans 9-11. Any suggestion that God chooses not to show mercy to some, is regarded as a threat to the triumph of God's grace in Christ. In their view, the reading of Romans 9 by Calvin introduces the specter of an unknown God, separated from his mercy displayed in the gospel of Jesus Christ, who sovereignly and inscrutably determines not to save some in a way that is symmetrical or parallel to his determination to save others. Even Ridderbos, who does not expressly affirm the universal embrace of all within God's merciful purpose of election, resists the idea that Paul limits God's mercy to a specific number of persons in distinction from others. Consequently, all of these interpreters oppose the traditional teaching of double predestination, which involves the election of some and the non-election/reprobation of others. In their view, God's purpose of election is singularly and solely gracious. If we may speak at all of a divine will of reprobation, it is viewed as God's choice to suffer reprobation himself on behalf of all who are ultimately the objects of mercy and grace (Barth). God's merciful election includes all persons, whether Jews and Gentiles, and it does not leave anyone outside the embrace of his grace in Christ. Any suggestion to the contrary, particularly the claim that God does not choose to save some, dims the light of the gospel and raises the specter of a God who is as much against some as he is for others.

There are two observations that need to be made regarding this emphasis upon the inclusiveness of God's mercy in his purpose of election. In the first place, it must be admitted that some formulations of the doctrine of double predestination, including Calvin's at points, tend to present God's merciful choice to save some as though

it were parallel or symmetrical with his choice not to save others. However, when Paul's argument in Romans 9 is read carefully, and especially when it is read within the framework of the entire argument of Romans 9-11, it becomes clear that his accent is predominantly upon the wonder of God's grace and mercy toward those whom he is pleased to save throughout the course of redemptive history.¹⁰¹ Not only is God's mercy highlighted throughout, but Paul's sorrow over the unbelief of many of his contemporaries is ultimately mitigated by his confidence in God's invincible purpose to save the full number of his people Israel as well as the Gentiles. It is scarcely possible to read Paul's argument, with its closing doxology in Romans 11:33-36, without recognizing that the broad embrace of many within God's mercy is being celebrated. The foreground of Paul's argument is the wonder of God's display of his mercy toward all his people in Christ. Though this foreground may have a background in the failure of those who remain unbelieving to be saved, greater emphasis rests upon the foreground of God's mercy than upon the background of his justice.

It is also important to recognize the asymmetry in Paul's view of God's merciful purpose of election and his just purpose of reprobation. Although Calvin's interpretation of Romans 9 is often criticized for the way he emphasizes the ultimacy of God's sovereign choice in the distinction between the elect and the reprobate, Calvin does acknowledge this asymmetry. In his comments on God's choice of Jacob rather than Esau, Calvin clearly recognizes that Paul's "assumption [is] that they were both the children of Adam, sinners by nature, and not possessed of a single particle of righteousness."¹⁰² Neither Jacob nor Esau have any just claim upon God's mercy in Christ, since they are both fallen sinners who are worthy of condemnation and death. That God should choose to show mercy toward anyone is entirely grounded in his free grace and mercy. Calvin does go on to affirm that the ultimate reason for the election of Jacob and all toward whom God is pleased to show mercy resides in God's own will. Though the "immediate cause for reprobation (*propinquam reprobationis causam esse*) is the curse which we all inherit from Adam," Paul does not account for the distinction between Jacob and Esau solely on this account. Rather, Paul teaches "that God has a suffi-

101. David Gibson, "The Day of God's Mercy: Romans 9–11 in Barth's Doctrine of Election," in *Engaging with Barth*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange, 163, makes a similar point: "Barth is surely right in one of his fundamental convictions: throughout Romans 9–11 election and rejection, mercy and hardening, do not operate in the divine will in a strictly symmetrical way. God's hardening of some and the display of his wrath serve the ultimate end of a display of his glory on the vessels of mercy." However, Gibson also adds something that I believe is essential to a proper reading of Romans 9: "But the important point to retain in this presentation is that the display of God's glory in mercy entails the existence of objects of hardening and vessels of wrath that remain outside the sphere of electing mercy."

102. *Comm. Rom.* 9:11, 200 (CO 49:178).

ciently just cause for election and reprobation in His own will (*in suo arbitrio satis iustam eligendi et reprobandae habere causam*).¹⁰³ But even in this emphasis, Calvin does not resort to a simple appeal to God's sovereign will without accenting the justice and wisdom of God in all his purposes and judgments.¹⁰⁴

The second of these broader theological commitments is the conviction that the traditional doctrine of particular election inevitably entails some form of theological *determinism*. The traditional doctrine of God's decree/s teaches that salvation and non-salvation depend, in the final analysis, upon God's sovereign will. The doctrine of double predestination fixes the number and names of those who will be saved and of those who will not be saved. According to the critics of this doctrine, there is no way at this point to avoid a kind of fatalism in which the ministry of the gospel and the invitation to faith in Christ play no role or are robbed of their urgency. In this view, the history of redemption is allegedly nothing more than the playing out of a script that God has written and that he will ensure occurs precisely as it was written.

Interestingly, one of the best formulations of this problem among the interpreters we have considered is that of Ridderbos. In his criticism of the traditional reading of Romans 9, Ridderbos makes the following observation:

Yet the relation between the purpose of God, his election and the preaching of the gospel remains of paramount importance in order to eliminate every notion of an automatic or deterministic election. Likewise nowhere in Paul's thought does the hidden decree of a *numerus clausus* function as the background or explanation of the separation that comes about by the preaching of the gospel, as though through this decree the same gospel were for those who are saved a fragrance of life

103. *Comm. Rom.* 9:11, 201 (CO 49:178). Commentators who generally follow Calvin's interpretation of Romans 9 will often observe that the asymmetry between election and reprobation is evident in verses 22-23 where Paul speaks of "vessels of wrath prepared for destruction" and "vessels of mercy which he [God] has prepared beforehand for glory." Cf. Murray, *Romans*, 2:36: "The main thought is that the destruction meted out to the vessels of wrath is something for which their precedent condition suits them. There is an exact correspondence between what they were in this life and the perdition to which they are consigned. ... The vessels of wrath can be said to fit themselves for destruction; they are the agents of the demerit which reaps destruction. But only God prepares for glory."

104. While Calvin is often accused of embracing an indeterminate view of God's "absolute power" (*potentia absoluta*), he explicitly rejects it as a "fiction" in his *Institutes* III.xiii.2, when addressing the doctrine of election. In his comments on Romans 9:21, Calvin also notes that "[t]he word *right* does not mean that the maker has power or strength to do what he pleases, but that this power to act rightly belongs to him. Paul does not want to claim for God an inordinate power (*Neque enim vult Deo asserere potestatem aliquam inordinatam*), but the power which he should rightly be given" (*Comm. Rom.* 9:21, 210; CO 49:212). For an excellent treatment of this question, see Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 312-46.

unto life and for those who are lost an odor of death unto death (2 Cor. 2:16). Rather, we must ascertain that over against such a deterministic conception he maintains the liberty of God's grace and the religious and ethical character of the encounter of man with his Creator in the gospel (Rom. 9:19ff.).¹⁰⁵

In this observation, Ridderbos makes an important point. However we interpret Paul's treatment of God's purpose of election in Romans 9, he does not affirm a doctrine that is incompatible with the urgency of his own apostolic preaching of the gospel. In the chapter immediately following Romans 9, Paul is very clear regarding the failure of many of his fellow Israelites to obtain salvation through faith in Christ. The fault lies entirely on the side of those who willfully refuse the invitation of the gospel that was extended to them. Paul does not appeal directly to the sovereign will of God, which he has expounded so boldly in chapter 9, to offer a kind of easy explanation for Israel's unbelief. On this score, Ridderbos makes a point that is valid and that is also present in the views of Barth, Cranfield, and Achtemeier, each of whom wishes to stress appropriately the decisiveness of the gospel's proclamation in time and the response required on the part of all those to whom it is addressed.

And yet, Paul's argument in Romans 9 does offer an account of God's sovereign and merciful purpose of election, which must ultimately be kept in mind when it comes to the gathering of the people of God throughout the course of redemptive history. When Ridderbos in this comment refers to the "liberty of God's grace," he does so in order to avoid the idea that human choices ultimately account for the salvation of some and not others. Subsequent to the statement quoted, Ridderbos acknowledges that Paul

105. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 352. As Ridderbos' comments make clear, he assumes that the doctrine of God's "decree" of particular individuals to salvation is somehow incompatible with human responsibility and the genuineness of God's work in the course of redemptive history. For Ridderbos, since Paul's emphasis is upon the history of redemption, his argument provides no warrant for the development of a doctrine of God's eternal counsel or decree. Richard Muller, "The Myth of 'Decretal Theology,'" *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 165-66, offers a telling criticism of this (illicit) disjunction between God's decree and history: "But to say that because the decree is eternal and election is grounded in God's eternity there can be no election in Christ and in history entirely misses the point of the older dogmatics: It is precisely *because* there is an eternal and absolute decree of God that election *can* occur in Christ and in history. Given the assumption of the older dogmatics that eternity is beyond time and is a simultaneous knowing and willing by God of all that God knows and wills, the eternal election of individuals is hardly separated — certainly not by time — from its enactment or execution in history. And given, moreover, a correct understanding of what the older theology meant by the divine ordination of 'whatsoever comes to pass,' the enactment, realization, or actualization of election in Christ and in history is undergirded and assured (not cancelled) by the eternal decree. *The distinction between the eternal decree and its execution is just that: a distinction, not a disjunction or a separation*" (emphasis original).

does not found the responsibility of man with respect to his being saved or lost in the fact that many may be said to be free to decide concerning it, but that through the preaching of the gospel God calls and fits him for this responsibility; and that, where freedom has been lost and has become spiritual impotence and blindness, the responsibility of man as the creature of God is nevertheless not taken away or abrogated.¹⁰⁶

While I agree with this acknowledgment, which expresses the unfathomable mystery of God's sovereignty in showing mercy and human responsibility in responding to his mercy, I do not believe the traditional view is incompatible with what Ridderbos wishes to affirm. For even in the case of the interpreters we have considered (including Barth!), it is admitted that we are not biblically permitted to affirm with certainty that all fallen sinners will be saved. But if this is so, what accounts for the salvation of any fallen sinner, whether Jew or Gentile? Surely we must say that this is ultimately due to God's gracious and merciful choice to save them in Christ. And in saying that, we are echoing the basic and indispensable feature of the traditional reading of Romans 9: all who are saved, all who are genuinely and properly recipients of the promise extended to Abraham, are those from among all peoples, whether Jews or Gentiles, toward whom God has chosen to show mercy.

4. Conclusion

Upon the basis of my interpretation of Paul's argument in Romans 9, especially verses 6-16, I do not believe the recent endeavor to interpret this passage to teach exclusively the corporate-election-of-Israel is tenable. Even though advocates of this interpretation properly emphasize the redemptive-historical setting for Paul's argument, they fail to do justice to the context and specifics of Paul's case. The occasion for Paul's treatment of God's purpose of election in this passage is undoubtedly the question of God's electing purpose with respect to the people of Israel in distinction from the Gentiles. However, when Paul raises the question whether or not the Word of God has failed to effect the salvation of many of his kinsmen according to the flesh, he is not merely asking whether or not Israel has lived up to its calling in the course of the history of redemption. He is asking whether or not God's Word of promise, which is demonstrated in the person and work of Christ, has and will achieve God's gracious and merciful purpose of election in respect to them. Nothing less than the eschatological salvation or non-salvation of his fellow Israelites is at issue.

106. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 353-54.

The particular answer that Paul gives to this question in Romans 9 is that God's Word has certainly not failed by virtue of the unbelief of many among the people of Israel. For in the course of God's redemptive dealings with his people Israel, God's purpose of election was—and continues to be—achieved among an elect remnant toward whom God has chosen to show his mercy. The core of Paul's answer requires that a distinction be drawn between Israel as an elect people and those among this people who are "children of the promise" in terms of God's purpose of election. Paul's appeal to God's choice of Isaac rather than Ishmael, and of Jacob rather than Esau, constitutes an essential part of his argument for this distinction. Since the corporate-election-of-Israel position is unable to accommodate this distinction, which plays such a fundamental role in the way Paul makes his case in Romans 9, it glosses over the most decisive feature of Paul's argument. Even though proponents of the corporate-election-of-Israel view are warranted in their emphasis upon the pre-eminence and wide embrace of God's mercy in the course of redemptive history, they are not warranted in their claim that Paul's argument includes no reference to God's just severity in choosing not to show mercy to all. The corporate-election-of-Israel reading of this passage is finally unable to give a plausible explanation for Paul's question in Romans 9:14: "What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part?" This question is occasioned by Paul's appeal to God's merciful choice of some but not all of the children of Israel according to the flesh. It finds its basis in the fact that God distinguishes, according to his purpose of election, between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Jacob and Esau. Within the framework of a corporate-election-of-Israel reading, this question has nothing like the urgency that it transparently has for Paul. For in the corporate election view, this distinction is always a penultimate one, which has to do only with Israel's role in the history of redemption.

While I am willing to concede that the traditional Augustinian/Calvinist reading of Romans 9 has sometimes diminished the redemptive-historical features of Paul's argument within the context of the book of Romans, I do not believe that this undermines the validity of its claim that there is an undeniable particularity or specificity in Paul's doctrine of election. The authors of the *Canons of Dort* were correct when they affirmed that "the cause of [God's] election is exclusively the good pleasure of God. This does not involve his choosing certain human qualities or actions from among all those possible as a condition of salvation, but rather involves his adopting certain particular persons from among the common mass of sinners as his own possession" (I/10).