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“TO THE JEW FIRST”: RHETORIC, STRATEGY, HISTORY, OR THEOLOGY?

Wayne A. Brindle

AS PAUL PENNED THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS, several factors combined to give the letter its particular structure and theme. First, Paul was in a new situation as he wintered in Corinth (for three months, Acts 20:2–6). He had evangelized four Roman provinces (Galatia, Asia, Macedonia, and Achaia; Rom. 15:19), and he looked forward to moving his focus westward as far as Spain (15:24). To do this he would also have to move his missions support-base westward, preferably to Rome.¹

Second, disunity had developed between Jewish and Gentile believers—brought about by the concern of Jews that the Mosaic Law and Jewish culture were being lost and even spurned by Gentiles—and many apparently believed that Paul was responsible for this loss.

Third, Paul’s previous defenses of his gospel against Judaizers (e.g., in Galatians and 2 Corinthians) had clearly exacerbated the spread of rumors that Paul’s view of the place of Jews in salvation history was totally negative and even that the coming (and rejection) of Christ had terminated God’s dealings with them.²

Fourth, as Paul contemplated his upcoming visit to Jerusalem, he knew that his view of the future of Israel and the problem of its unity with Gentiles in the church would occupy center stage. In fact Paul apparently saw the collection of funds for Christians in Jerusalem as an outgrowth of the agreement between James, Pe-

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¹ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 17.

² J. C. Beker, “The Faithfulness of God and the Priority of Israel in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” in *The Romans Debate*, ed. Karl P. Donfried, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 328.

ter, and John on the one hand and Paul and Barnabas on the other so that the latter would “remember the poor” as they went to the Gentiles (Gal. 2:9–10; cf. Rom. 15:25–27).

Fifth, Paul apparently dealt with these factors by utilizing his winter respite to write a coherent, structured presentation of the fact that the only understanding of the gospel that does justice to God’s eternal program of salvation and to what Christ accomplished on the cross is the gospel of justification by faith. For this reason Christians throughout the church age have considered Romans as Paul’s best and most thorough explanation of the gospel—even his “magna carta” of salvation.

Romans was clearly written to a particular church (specifically several house congregations; 16:5, 10–11, 14–15) by an apostle who was dealing with specific problems, both theological and practical. This, however, does not negate the fact that Paul used these issues to demonstrate the necessity of the gospel and to show its continuity with God’s promises to Israel.

As Beker notes, “the theme of Romans (Rom. 1:16–17) revolves around four interrelated issues: (1) the gospel reveals the righteousness of God; (2) the righteousness of God is apprehended by faith; (3) the gospel is the ‘power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek’; (4) the righteousness of faith in the gospel is the confirmation and fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of Hab. 2:4.”³ The climax, he says, is reached in Romans 11:32: “For God has shut up all in disobedience so that he may show mercy to all.” This climax, in fact, depends on Paul’s emphasis on the particularity of Jews and Gentiles and even on the priority of Israel in Paul’s thematic statement in 1:16 (“to the Jew first”).

The purpose of this article is to examine this statement by Paul in Romans 1:16 (repeated in 2:9–10) in order to determine whether Paul used it (a) purely as a rhetorical device, (b) as a side reference to his supposed church-planting strategy of preaching in synagogues first, so as to divide the congregation, win some God-fearing Gentiles, and start a Gentile-dominated church with these new believers; (c) as an acknowledgement that in the course of history Jews heard the gospel before Gentiles did; or (d) as a pointer to Paul’s belief that Christ’s mission to fulfill God’s covenants with Israel has theological priority and provides some structure in dealing with Jewish-Gentile issues in the church.

³ Ibid., 329.

PRIORITY OF THE JEWS IN SALVATION

The correlative conjunction $\tau\epsilon$ in the phrase "to the Jew first and also the Greek" (*Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρώτον καὶ Ἕλληνι*) is generally used when something is added that does not directly and necessarily follow from what precedes (as opposed to *καί*). $\tau\epsilon$ is the most general of all the copulatives, showing simply that the word (or words) preceding it has some connection with the one (or ones) following it. As a postpositive the place of $\tau\epsilon$ is usually after the first word of a clause.⁴ $\tau\epsilon$ frequently strengthens *καί*, either directly before it (as in $\tau\epsilon$ *καί*) or with one or more words intervening (as here).⁵

The combination of $\tau\epsilon . . . καί$ marks two closely related elements, and means "both . . . and"⁶ or "not only . . . but also."⁷ It connects concepts, usually of the same kind or opposites.⁸ It also denotes a closer connection than simply *καί*.⁹ By itself, however, the $\tau\epsilon . . . καί$ combination gives no hint of the relative value of the two units that are connected.¹⁰ The construction here places both the Jew and the Greek in the same situation, but does not make them

⁴ Friedrich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. Robert Funk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 230; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 169; and Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG, 1992), 1369.

⁵ Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*, 1369 (cf. Luke 2:16; 21:11; John 2:15; Acts 1:8; 26:30; Rom. 1:16; Phil. 1:7; Heb. 9:2, 19).

⁶ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 1:790–91.

⁷ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2d ed., rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 807.

⁸ For similar uses see Acts 5:24 ("the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests"); 1 Corinthians 1:24 ("both Jews and Greeks"); Romans 1:14 ("both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish"). See also Matthew 22:10; 27:48; Luke 21:11; 22:66; 24:20; Acts 1:1; 2:9–10; 4:27; 8:12; 9:2, 15, 18; 10:2; 22:4; 24:3; 26:3, 22; Romans 1:12; 1 Corinthians 1:2, 30; Hebrews 2:4; 5:1, 7; 6:4, 19; 10:33; and James 3:7. See also Josephus, *The Jewish War* 2.142; and idem, *The Antiquities of the Jews* 1.9.

⁹ Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 230.

¹⁰ A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 1179.

identical (cf. Acts 26:20).¹¹ Nor does the *καί* answer to the *πρώτον*; that is, only the Jews are “first,” and not the Greeks.¹²

When the nouns *Ἰουδαῖοι* and *Ἕλληνες* are connected in the New Testament, they nearly always occur with *τε καί* or *τε . . . καί*.¹³ In Romans 1:16 the phrase “to the Jew first and also to the Greek” explains and emphasizes the meaning of *παντί* in “everyone who believes.” The connectives denote the “fundamental equality of Jew and Gentile in the face of the gospel,”¹⁴ and the adverbial *πρώτον* shows that within this equality the Jew has a certain priority.¹⁵ Paul spoke of *Ἕλληνες* in only four epistles, and each time he used it with either *Ἰουδαῖοι* or *βάρβαροι*. It denotes the non-Jewish part of the human race, the Hellenistic inhabitants of the Roman Empire (3:9; 10:12). The addition of *πρώτον* to *Ἰουδαίῳ* indicates that “Paul is conscious of the precedence of the Jew on the basis of salvation history” but the combination with *Ἕλληνες* stresses the universal relevance of the gospel—especially Paul’s formulation of it.¹⁶

In what way did Paul speak of the priority of the Jews? Some commentators see this as merely priority of time. As Calvin put it, “They were the first partakers of God’s promise and calling.”¹⁷ Käsemann finds a similar construction in 2 Corinthians 8:5—“first to the Lord and [then] to us”—and suggests that Paul was simply giving the Jews precedence “for the sake of the continuity of the plan of salvation.”¹⁸ Johnson, noting the use of the same phrase in

¹¹ Adolf Schlatter, *Romans: The Righteousness of God*, trans. Siegfried Schatzmann (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), 19.

¹² Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 1152; cf. Wilhelm Michaelis, “*πρώτον*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:869.

¹³ Blass and Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 230.

¹⁴ C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: Clark, 1975), 1:91.

¹⁵ Marcion removed the word *πρώτον* in Romans 1:16 in order to diminish the relevance of Jews to the church, and because of his influence some manuscripts omit it (A. G. Padgett, “Marcion,” in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph Martin and Peter Davids [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997], 706–8).

¹⁶ Hans Windisch, “*Ἕλλην*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:513.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Calvin’s Commentaries, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 19:83.

¹⁸ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey Bromiley

Romans 2:9 in a context of judgment, also opts for "simple historical precedence." He concludes that any interpretation that gives theological preference to the Jews would require the word "then" with the phrase "to the Greek."¹⁹ However, as already noted, the *τε . . . καί* construction makes such an insertion unnecessary.

Some who see only a historical sequence in the use of the word "first" conclude that to imply more than this would force Christians to preach the gospel to Jews first throughout the church period, which would contradict the fact that there is no distinction between Jews and Gentiles regarding sin (3:22) or the possibility of salvation (10:12).²⁰ Newell notes that in Ephesians 2:17 the preaching of the gospel to Gentiles is mentioned before the preaching of the gospel to the Jews, which does not imply the priority of Gentiles in evangelism. He points to the use of *πρώτον* in Romans 1:8 as setting the pattern in the context: "First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all"; that is, Paul's statement of thanksgiving came first, before the rest. In the same way, the gospel came "to the Jew first and also to the Greek," but now it is "proclaimed to all indiscriminately"—Jews and Gentiles.²¹

Most commentators, however, believe that Paul's terminology here implies more than mere sequence of time. It is true that in God's economy the gospel was preached first to Jews. In fact Jesus commanded this and the apostles followed it (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4, 8; 13:46).²² The implication in Romans 1:16, however, seems to be that the gospel has primary relevance to Jews. The gospel has its roots in God's plan for the role of Israel as revealed in the Old Testament.²³ As Paul noted, God chose Israel to receive the promises that gave rise to the gospel, and these promises were committed to Israel (3:1–2; 9:4–5). Jesus said that salvation is of the Jews (John 4:22), by which he apparently meant that God's salvation promises were originally designed for Abraham's descendants and were car-

(Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 23; cf. William Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse* (Chicago: Moody, 1938), 22.

¹⁹ S. Lewis Johnson, "The Gospel That Paul Preached," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 128 (October–December 1971): 332.

²⁰ Newell, *Romans Verse by Verse*, 22.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² William Sanday and Arthur Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary, 5th ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1902), 24.

²³ J. Julius Scott Jr., "Gentiles and the Ministry of Jesus: Further Observations on Matt. 10:5–6; 15:21–28," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (June 1990): 169.

ried out through them. Paul was certainly aware of Jesus' priority of reaching the Jews. Jewish Christians would have familiarized him with the traditions reflected in Matthew 10:5 and 15:24. Peter exhibited the same understanding at the end of his Pentecost sermon in Jerusalem (Acts 2:39). In Romans 1:3–4, while explaining the origin of the gospel, Paul felt compelled to mention that Jesus came through the seed of David, the promised messianic line. Clearly the preparation for the revelation of the gospel was laid in Israel, and because of that "the gospel is pre-eminently the gospel for the Jew."²⁴ In fact, as Wenham says, "the reason Paul was embarrassed about the Jews' failure to believe in Jesus is because his own theology affirms the priority of the Jews."²⁵

The context of Romans 1:16 is theological, not historical, thus implying something more than mere sequence. The promise of the gospel has a special applicability to Israel.²⁶ Romans 9–11 is sufficient to show this. Paul presented Jesus not only as the Savior of the world, but also as Israel's Messiah.²⁷ In addition through the prophets God had promised the gospel (1:2).²⁸ And when the prophets spoke of the future spiritual relationship of Jews and Gentiles, they reserved a prominent place for the Jews (Isa. 59:20; 60:1–3).²⁹ As Moo puts it, "To Israel the promises were first given, and to the Jews they still particularly apply."³⁰ The following discussion traces this theological priority in Romans.

This priority of the Jews is balanced, however, in two ways: (a) by Paul's use of the $\tau\epsilon \dots \kappa\alpha\iota$ construction, which coordinates the two—Jew and Greek,³¹ and (b) by the prior use of $\pi\alpha\nu\tau\acute{\iota}$, which

²⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 28.

²⁵ David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 181.

²⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 69. Thomas R. Schreiner theorizes that Paul may have been thinking of his practice of using synagogues as starting points for preaching, but he also admits that the place of the Jews in salvation history continued to be crucial for Paul (*Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], 62).

²⁷ Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* 121.

²⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 257.

²⁹ Willem A. VanGemeren, "Israel as the Hermeneutical Crux in the Interpretation of Prophecy (II)," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 (fall 1984): 285.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 68, n. 164.

Paul later expanded as he emphasized the universality of salvation by faith (e.g., 3:22).³² In fact the universal focus of salvation is signaled from the very beginning of the epistle. As Garlington has noted, Romans 1:16–17 parallels 1:1–7, so that the revelation of God's righteousness to both Jews and Greeks is "the functional equivalent of 'the obedience of faith among all the nations.'"³³ As God's plan was worked out, His blessing of the Jews accomplished His blessing of Gentiles.³⁴

PRIORITY OF THE JEWS IN JUDGMENT

In Romans 2:9–10 Paul used the same phrase that proclaims the priority of the Jews in salvation ("to the Jew first," 1:16) to declare that the Jews have priority in judgment. "As the word of the promise has gone 'first' to the Jew, so does punishment for failure to respond to that word go 'first' to the Jew. In contrast to the Jews' tendency to regard their election as a guarantee that they would be 'first' in salvation and 'last' in judgment, Paul insists that their priority be applied equally to both."³⁵

Paul's purpose in 2:6–11 is to demonstrate that God will judge everyone on the same basis—by works, not by identity or heritage. God will show no favoritism—either to the Jews or to the Gentiles. The focus here is on God's standard of judgment, not on salvation, because no one can meet the conditions of obedience and righteousness set forth here. In 3:9–20 Paul showed that because no one meets the requirement of works, all are condemned and under sin. As Moo notes, the promise in 2:7, 10 can "never become operative because the condition for its fulfillment—consistent, earnest seeking after good—can never be realized."³⁶

Paul thus argued that neither Jews nor Gentiles who lack consistent good works will escape judgment.³⁷ Furthermore twice he

³² Cf. Reidar Hvalvik, "To the Jew First and Also to the Greek': The Meaning of Romans 1:16b," *Mishkan* 10 (1989): 1–8.

³³ Donald B. Garlington, "The Obedience of Faith in the Letter to the Romans; Part II: The Obedience of Faith and Judgment by Works," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (spring 1991): 49.

³⁴ Joseph P. Braswell, "'The Blessing of Abraham' versus 'The Curse of the Law': Another Look at Gal. 3:10–13," *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (spring 1991): 89.

³⁵ Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 139.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁷ Schreiner, *Romans*, 114.

stated that Jews have a priority in this, possibly to echo the responsibility put forward by their priority in salvation in 1:16. The word “Jew,” of course, strictly refers to a member of the tribe of Judah (2 Kings 16:6), but it came to be used of all Israelites. Paul indicated that they took pride in the term (Rom. 2:17). The word “Jew(s)” is used seventy-nine times in Acts and seventy-one times in John, but only twenty-six times by Paul, eleven of which are in Romans.

In light of the fact that Jews expected the Gentiles to be judged by God, while they themselves would escape God’s wrath, it is striking that Paul stressed that the Jews will have “priority” in judgment. This agrees with the Old Testament. Jeremiah 25:29 declares that when God begins to bring a sword against all those who inhabit the earth, He will begin at the “city which is called by my name.” God said of Israel, “You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities” (Amos 3:2). But this prophetic teaching seems to have been overlooked in first-century Judaism.³⁸ Paul implied that partly because of the Jews’ privileged moral status—having the Mosaic Law and knowing God’s will—they are given this priority (Rom. 2:17–24).³⁹ Spiritual privilege brings spiritual responsibility.⁴⁰ It may even be said that those who proved unfaithful and disobedient placed themselves in a worse situation than those of the Gentile nations to whom God had not specially revealed Himself.⁴¹ The spiritual and moral responsibility of Israel is heightened by God’s choice of and covenant with that nation.⁴²

Just as the declaration of the priority of the Jews in salvation (1:16) is followed almost immediately by the pronouncement of man’s judgment (v. 18), so is the offer of blessing in 2:7 followed by the announcement of cursing in verses 8–9, for both Jews and Greeks. The priority of the Jews in salvation history is not something on which they can rely. Paul’s proclamation that there is no favoritism with God shattered Jewish presumptions on God’s

³⁸ Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 120.

³⁹ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 303.

⁴⁰ Robert Mounce, *Romans*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1995), 92.

⁴¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 95.

⁴² Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1959), 88, 118.

mercy and His withholding of punishment from them.⁴³

It must also be noted, however, that the priority of the Jews in judgment in 2:9 is turned into blessing in 2:10, which states that they are given priority in the bestowal of glory. Apparently the judgment will "take account of the priority of the Jew not only in the dispensing of retribution (vs. 9) but also in the dispensing of bliss."⁴⁴

PAUL'S SALVATION HISTORY

A dominant issue in most of Paul's letters is how Judaism and Jewish Christianity relate to Gentile Christianity.⁴⁵ The Epistle to the Romans attempts to answer the "Jewish question" while at the same time restating in detail the gospel in order to gain the support of the Roman church. Paul opened Romans by retelling salvation history, tying the gospel for Gentiles and Christ's resurrection to the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel through the Jewish Messiah (Rom. 1:1-7). God's salvation for humanity is first to the Jews and then to the Greeks (1:16; 2:9-10; 9:24; 15:8-9). Paul had this order in mind throughout Romans (3:19-21; 4:16; 9:1-11:36). As Nanos puts it, "The risen Christ is the Savior of Israel first, and also of the whole world."⁴⁶

"To the Jew first and also to the Greek" is not an intrusion into Paul's letter to the Romans. It is a basic part of the theme. Paul's teaching on justification by faith can be understood as an answer to the question, "How is it possible for Jews and Gentiles to stand on the same level of advantage before God?"⁴⁷ The opening sections of the epistle demonstrate that the Law, rather than giving Jews a position of advantage over Gentiles, actually gives them greater responsibility and potential for more severe judgment. Paul showed that Jews are just as much in need of God's grace as Gentiles (1:18-3:20). He then described the means by which Jews as well as Gentiles can receive that grace (3:21-5:21). He also explained how these blessings are experienced in the present (6:1-8:39).

⁴³ Käsemann, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 60.

⁴⁴ Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 67.

⁴⁵ Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* 179.

⁴⁶ Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1996), 227.

⁴⁷ Donald H. Madvig, "The Missionary Preaching of Paul: A Problem in New Testament Theology," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 20 (June 1977): 150.

In chapter 9 Paul dealt with what some would see as the major "salvation-history" question of the book: "If Israel's blessings are freely open to Gentiles, what then of the promises to Israel itself?"⁴⁸ Glenny lists four questions Paul addressed in Romans 9-11: (1) How can God offer the gospel to all people if it is based on the Old Testament Scriptures, which give priority of place to the Jews? (2) How can this gospel be true if Israel as a whole rejected it? (3) How can this gospel go to the Gentiles if Israel does not first receive it? (4) If God has not kept His promises to the Israelites concerning their salvation and election, how can Christians be assured He will keep His promises to them?⁴⁹

As Paul began to answer these questions, he returned first to his answer to the first Jewish objection he propounded in 3:1: "What advantage has the Jew?" There he said, "Great in every respect. First of all, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God," referring apparently to God's covenant promises, which Paul had already said belong "to the Jew first" in salvation (1:16). In 9:4-5 Paul listed many of the great advantages God had given to Israel: the adoption as sons, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, the worship of God, the promises, and the patriarchs of Israel. Then immediately he dealt with a major stumbling block for the Jews' acceptance of the gospel: Does the fact that most of the Jews have so far rejected the gospel imply that God has now rejected Israel and taken back His promises?

Paul's answer to this question is a resounding no. God never promised to save all the physical descendants of Abraham, Paul said, and he proved this in two ways. First, when God gave Abraham the original promise, He stated specifically that it would be fulfilled in Abraham's son Isaac (9:7). A Jewish objector might say, however, that Paul had missed an important point: Since Ishmael was the son of an Egyptian woman, he obviously was not part of God's "chosen" people. Paul therefore proceeded to a second line of proof. Isaac's wife, Rebekah, conceived two sons, Jacob and Esau. Yet God chose only one of them, not both of them, to receive His covenantal blessing. Paul stated that since God in fact chose the younger of the twins before either of them was born, God's choice did not depend on their works or their desires. He quoted passages from both Genesis and Malachi in order to affirm this point (Rom.

⁴⁸ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1988), lxii.

⁴⁹ W. Edward Glenny, "The 'People of God' in Romans 9:25-26," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (January-March 1995): 46.

9:12–13). It is clear from these arguments, then, that the Jews should not think that every physical Jew must receive God's saving grace in order for Him to be true to His promises.

In fact Paul next demonstrated that God can show His mercy to some but not all (vv. 14–29). God gave Moses His mercy, for example, yet He judged Pharaoh for his rebellion. God always judges on the basis of works (2:6), but He is free to go beyond judgment and give mercy to some (9:18). Does this mean that God unfairly judges the sin which He himself causes? Obviously not. The point of the illustration concerning the potter and his clay (vv. 20–21) is not to portray God treating people arbitrarily, but rather to rebuke the attitude that would imply that God is unrighteous (cf. 3:3–8). The answer comes in 9:22–23. God wants to show both His justice (wrath and power) and His mercy (riches of glory). Those who prepare themselves for destruction will receive just punishment, just as Pharaoh did (v. 22).⁵⁰ On the other hand those to whom God has shown mercy and whom He has prepared beforehand will receive His glory (v. 23). This latter group includes both Jews and Gentiles (v. 24).

But precisely why is it that the Jews were rejecting the gospel? From 9:30 to 10:21 Paul presented three reasons. First, as a group they refused to accept God's grace by faith (9:30–33). They did this because they stumbled over Christ, the prophesied stumbling stone and rock of entrapment. They preferred to try to establish their own works-righteousness, rather than confess Christ for righteousness (10:3–4). Second, they ignored what the Scriptures say about righteousness by faith. Deuteronomy 30 spells out God's way of mercy and acceptance, which is exactly the way of the gospel: confess Christ as Lord, and believe that God raised Him from the dead (Rom. 10:9). This mercy is freely available to everyone who

⁵⁰ Exodus 4–14 indicates that Pharaoh hardened his own heart long before God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Apparently God used Pharaoh's own sin and hardness of heart as further punishment, much as Paul indicated concerning the pagans in Romans 1:24–28. Many scholars interpret the phrase "prepared for destruction" as a divine passive ("prepared by God"; see Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 607; Schreiner, *Romans*, 521–22; and Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 418). However, it can also be viewed as a middle reflexive ("prepared themselves"; see James R. Edwards, *Romans*, New International Biblical Commentary [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992], 241), which the present context seems to favor (William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, New Testament Commentary [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981], 328; Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 368; John R. W. Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1994], 272; and W. H. Griffith Thomas, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946], 261). Newell compares this statement with Romans 2:5, where those who refuse to repent are said to store up wrath for themselves (*Romans Verse by Verse*, 374).

will come to Christ for it (vv. 11-13). Third, when the apostles preached the gospel of Christ to Israel, they heard it and understood it, but they did not believe it (faith should come through hearing the message about Christ; v. 17). God did His part to offer mercy, but most of the nation refused it because they would not put their trust in Christ, whom they crucified. The Jews are the guilty ones; God fulfilled His promises and announced that fact to the Jews everywhere, but they refused to accept it on God's terms.

Paul then showed that in spite of Israel's stubbornness and rejection, God has not eliminated His chosen people from His plan and promises. God is always calling out a remnant (11:1-6). Paul himself, for example, was a believing Jew. Elijah once thought the faithful had disappeared, but God informed him otherwise (vv. 2-4). God always has a believing remnant, chosen by His grace and drawn to Him in faith. But most of Israel is spiritually insensitive, hardened to the gospel (v. 7) as part of God's judicial judgment of the nation for their continual rejection. One reason Paul was so anxious to win Gentiles to Christ was to cause unbelieving Jews to realize how many promised blessings they were missing (but that the Gentiles were receiving), so that they too would put away their stubbornness and come to Christ in humble trust.

With the olive tree illustration Paul at last arrived at his explanation of how Jews and Gentiles presently fit together in God's salvation program (v. 17). The tree represents God's covenant with Abraham. As judgment on Israel for their rejection of the Messiah and their unbelief, God sliced some branches off the tree; that is, He temporarily set aside the bulk of the nation from His covenantal blessings. He turned instead to the Gentiles, grafting them like unnatural, wild branches into His blessings. They did not have to become natural branches (i.e., Jews) in order to be grafted in. As Gentiles in the church, they are full partners with believing Jews (Gal. 3:18), and they receive all the spiritual blessings that believing Jews receive. Yet God will still fulfill His original kingdom promises to national Israel (Rom. 11:25-27), because His promises and calling are irrevocable (v. 29). For the time being, most of Israel is hardened (this hardness and blindness are removed, however, in Christ; 2 Cor. 3:14-15). But the day is coming, after the full number of Gentiles have been saved, when God will remove this hardness of heart, save His people Israel, and fulfill His covenantal promises to them (Rom. 11:25).

Paul now reached the climax of his retelling of salvation history. God is now showing mercy to Gentiles (through the preaching of the gospel), whereas most Jews stubbornly refuse to believe (vv. 30-31). The time will come, however, when God will show mercy to

them also, so that they may be saved. The Jews have priority in both salvation promises and in judgment for their disobedience. God will finish His covenant work with them, because His promises are irrevocable. Yet God's plan of salvation is universal, just as the sacrifice of His Son has universal benefit. The Gentiles have been added (grafted) into the promises, yet they too must believe in order to be saved. God has indeed shut everyone up to the judgment of disobedience (2:6–11; 3:10–18), so that He might offer His mercy to everyone, on His own terms—through faith in Christ.

Russell suggests that as Paul completed his epistle, he demonstrated to the Romans that he was modeling God's program by going to the Jews first and then to the Gentiles. For example he stated that he must go first with the collection to the Jews in Jerusalem (15:30–32) and then to the Gentiles in Spain by way of Rome (vv. 22–29).⁵¹ The progress of the gospel must include both groups throughout the present church age. True missionary endeavor must take this into account.

CONCLUSION

Paul's phrase "to the Jew first" is not simply a rhetorical device. It was designed not to deceive readers about his view of Israel, but to emphasize it. Paul's attitude toward Israel, though cautious because of their hardness of heart and constant rejection of the gospel, is based on a thoroughgoing conviction that Israel's election by God is permanent and determinate for salvation history.

Nor does the phrase merely depict Paul's missionary pattern or the chronological precedence of Israel as the object of gospel preaching, since the context of Romans 1:16 is primarily theological and is designed to set the stage for Paul's consideration of the relevance of God's promises to both Jews and Gentiles throughout the epistle. Paul's emphasis on the justification of Gentiles by faith never overshadows his confidence that God's plan for Israel is still unfinished and that God's fulfillment of His covenant promises to Israel is just as significant in this age as His focus on worldwide Gentile salvation. For Paul, Christ's mission to fulfill God's covenants with Israel has theological priority and provides a paradigm for dealing with Jewish-Gentile issues in the church.

⁵¹ Walter B. Russell III, "An Alternative Suggestion for the Purpose of Romans," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (April–June 1988): 184.



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