

# **“The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable” (Romans 11:29): If So, How Can Paul Declare that “Not All Israelites Truly Belong to Israel” (9:6)?<sup>1</sup>**

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Since Vatican II introduced *Nostra Aetate* 4 in 1965, it has become widely recognized “in our time” that Paul insisted God’s choice of and promises to Israel were eternal, and that absolute affirmation of this continuity should shape Christian discourses about and relationships with Jews and Judaism. That document, and the many statements in this direction by other Christian organizations that followed it, appeal explicitly to Paul’s statement that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom 11:29) as well as his exclamation that “all Israel will be saved” (11:26; both transl. from *NRSV*).<sup>2</sup> Continued covenantal relationship between God and all Israel is affirmed rather than denied on the basis that Israel remains “beloved because of the fathers” (11:28). That relationship is understood to operate presently—in various ways by various organizations—to some degree independent of whether Jewish people have become participants in the relationship that Christians celebrate with God through their faith in Jesus Christ,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is a revision of a study originally written for translation into German for a Protestant liturgical pastoral guidebook for the reading of 9:1-8, 14-16: “‘Gottes Gaben und Berufungen können Ihn nicht gereuen.’ - Wie, also, sollten wir Römer 9,1-16 (insbesondere V. 6) übersetzen und verstehen?” in “*Die Gotteskindschaft des jüdischen Volkes (Röm 9,1-16)*”: *Arbeitshilfe zum Israelsonntag 2016: 10. Sonntag nach Trinitatis*, ed. Volker Haarmann, Ursula Rudnick, and Axel Töllner, trans. V. Haarmann (Düsseldorf/Hannover: Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland, Evangelisch-Lutherische Landeskirche Hannover, Begegnung von Christen und Juden Bayern, 2016), 14-23; <[www.ekir.de/christen-juden](http://www.ekir.de/christen-juden)>.

<sup>2</sup> For some examples from Protestant churches, see Franklin Sherman, “The Road to Reconciliation: Protestant Church Statements on Christian-Jewish Relations,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity’s Sacred Obligation*, ed. M. C. Boys (Lanham: Sheed and Ward/Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 241-251; other essays discuss Catholic examples, and various other developments and statements.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. The Vatican’s Commission for Religious Relations with Jews released a new document entitled, “The Gifts and Calling of God are irrevocable,” marking the 50th anniversary of the ground-breaking declaration “*Nostra Aetate*,” at: <[http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/10/vatican\\_issues\\_new\\_document\\_on\\_christian-jewish\\_dialogue\\_/1193274](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/10/vatican_issues_new_document_on_christian-jewish_dialogue_/1193274)>.

although traditionally it has been maintained that Jews will be convinced to share this conviction with Christians at some point in the future.<sup>4</sup>

Paul's argument begins in chapter 9 with the powerful promise of the continuity of his Israelite compatriots' identity as Israelites. Regardless of whether each Israelite already shared Paul's convictions about Jesus and thus presently undertook to proclaim God's good news to the nations alongside of himself, they all remain recipients of the gifts given to Israel (9:1-5). The argument ends in chapter 11 with the same message of God's continued commitment to the continuity of Israel, to which post-Shoah theologians appeal to shape new paradigms for the Church going forward. However, the impact of these declarations of continuity is significantly mitigated when not entirely subverted by the way that the rest of the language in chapter 9 is translated and interpreted, and most significantly, in verse 6.<sup>5</sup>

The ostensibly contrasting idea is introduced dramatically in 9:6 to the reader of modern translations [*ou gar pantes hoi ex Israēl houtoi Israēl*]: "For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel" (NRSV).<sup>6</sup> Paul's language is presented as if designed to express that Israelites who do not believe in Jesus have already been excluded from identification as the Israel of God, although they can rectify that by becoming Christians (members of the Church; or, less anachronistically, Christ-followers).<sup>7</sup> Translations commonly introduce the word "really" or "truly," which serves to help make this point, as if some current day Israelites are not "really" members of Israel, not "truly" Israelites, although that qualification is not in the Greek manuscripts.

The verses that follow verse 6 continue to be understood to highlight this message of discontinuity, of Israel as an entity that is other than the one historically identified as the descendants of the tribes of Jacob/Israel. Instead, the Church (the community of Christians) has taken their place and become Israel, variously worded (including such "supersessionist" terms as "replaced," "reconfigured," "redefined," "spiritual," "true," none of which were used by Paul to

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<sup>4</sup> The interpretation of the language in Paul on which these eschatological conversion scenarios are based is questioned by Mark D. Nanos and Philip A. Cunningham, "Implications of Paul's Hopes for the End of Days for Jews and Christians Today: A Critical Re-evaluation of the Evidence," *Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations (SCJR)* 9.1 (2014): 1-45; <<http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/scjr/article/view/5793>>.

<sup>5</sup> The tendency for Christian traditional interpreters prior to NA 4 to translate and interpret even 11:29 in ways that did not affirm eternal commitment to Jews who were not Christians is traced in Joseph Sievers, "'God's Gifts and Call Are Irrevocable': The Reception of Romans 11:29 through the Centuries and Christian-Jewish Relations," in *Reading Israel in Romans: Legitimacy and Plausibility of Divergent Interpretations*, ed. Cristina Grenholm and Daniel Patte (Harrisburg, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 2000), 127-173.

<sup>6</sup> KJV: "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel"; NASB: "For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel"; NIV: "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel"; "Denn es sind nicht alle Israeliter, die von Israel sind" (Luther, 1912).

<sup>7</sup> I want to bring particular attention to the earlier work of Lloyd Gaston on this tension, especially his essay "Israel's Enemies in Pauline Theology," reprinted in *Paul and the Torah* (Vancouver: University of Columbia Press, 1987), 80-99, and dedicate this essay to his memory. He highlighted Paul's concern that the role of Israel in bringing the gospel to the nations was central versus the usual emphasis on them becoming saved. Thank you, Lloyd; may your memory (continue to) be for a blessing.

describe Israel).<sup>8</sup> In this way Paul's insistence that God's covenant promises to Israel are eternal and the Church's traditional perspective that Paul could not have meant that Jews who did not believe in Jesus were still included in those promises, is supposedly resolved by redefining Israel so as to exclude those Jews while at the same time including any non-Jews who believe in Jesus Christ. But it is difficult to square that with Paul's opening and closing arguments: he was discussing Jews who did not agree with him about Jesus when he appealed to the certainty of their continued identity as Israel (9:1-5; 11:11-32).

Is there an alternative for those Christian interpreters (or anyone else) who wish to interpret Paul as accurately as possible and to avoid the legacy of this interpretive conundrum if not contradiction at the center of Paul's thinking about Israel, and the role these still play "in our time"? Yes, there is.

After all, logically, it makes good sense that Paul would design the arguments that follow his opening declarations in chapter 9 and precede his conclusions in chapter 11 to confirm rather than to contradict them. Before we focus on chapter 9, let us survey some of the conclusions reached in chapter 11. This will help us develop working assumptions for re-reading verses 6-16 of chapter 9, especially verse 6. Throughout, appeal will be made to more literal translations to re-evaluate the most probable meaning in its original context.

### **The Expectations Created by the Conclusions Reached in Chapter 11**

It is widely recognized that Paul introduces a series of metaphors in chapter 11 to insist that those of his fellow Jews who have not joined him in his convictions about Jesus nevertheless remain members of Israel, and, as such, are ensured of receipt of God's promise of salvation, signified by his bold claim that "all Israel will be saved" (verse 26). Equally influential, indeed, the text around which *Nostra Aetate* 4 built, as already noted, is the related claim that while some

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<sup>8</sup> "On the part of many of the Church Fathers the so-called replacement theory or supersessionism steadily gained favor until in the Middle Ages it represented the standard theological foundation of the relationship with Judaism: the promises and commitments of God would no longer apply to Israel because it had not recognized Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, but had been transferred to the Church of Jesus Christ which was now the true 'new Israel', the new chosen people of God. Arising from the same soil, Judaism and Christianity in the centuries after their separation became involved in a theological antagonism which was only to be defused at the Second Vatican Council. With its Declaration "Nostra Aetate" (No.4) the Church unequivocally professes, within a new theological framework, the Jewish roots of Christianity. While affirming salvation through an explicit or even implicit faith in Christ, the Church does not question the continued love of God for the chosen people of Israel. A replacement or supersession theology which sets against one another two separate entities, a Church of the Gentiles and the rejected Synagogue whose place it takes, is deprived of its foundations. From an originally close relationship between Judaism and Christianity a long-term state of tension had developed, which has been gradually transformed after the Second Vatican Council into a constructive dialogue relationship." Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews: "The Gifts and the Calling of God are Irrevocable" (Rom 11:29): A Reflection on Theological Questions Pertaining to Catholic-Jewish Relations on the Occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of "Nostra Aetate" (No. 4);

<[http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/10/vatican\\_issues\\_new\\_document\\_on\\_christian-jewish\\_dialogue\\_/1193274](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/12/10/vatican_issues_new_document_on_christian-jewish_dialogue_/1193274)>.

Israelites are presently considered "enemies [or: "estranged" (discussed below)] for your sake," at the same time they remain "beloved for the sake of the fathers, for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (verses 28-29). These statements can be made clearer and stronger, so too can be the messages in the metaphors preceding them.<sup>9</sup>

Although I have posed the tension between the positive message in 11:26, 28-29 and the negative one in 9:6 in traditional terms that raise the need to revisit the options for 9:6, the standard translation in chapter 11 ironically hides within it a supposition that should be noticed, and that I also want to challenge. The usual translation and interpretation of *sōzo* as "saved" is in a circular way supported by the way that 9:6 has been understood—that many Israelites are in some way already outside of covenantal standing as Israel, although they *will be returned* to that standing at some point in the future. However, the Greek verb translated "will be saved" in 11:26 is a future form of *sōzō*, which is not used to describe saving as in returning to life that which had died, so to speak, but to keeping alive—although the implications for the translation and interpretation of Paul's arguments seems to have gone unnoticed. In keeping with the usage of Paul's time, *sōzō* and cognates refer to "safekeeping," and in the future tense as Paul used it here, to "will be protected" or "preserved" as in "kept safe," or "delivered" or "rescued" from danger, or for one who is ill (or, e.g., a branch that is injured), to be "healed" (*LSJ*).<sup>10</sup> This applies to the other uses of cognates of *sōzō* in the immediate context: "for their protection" (10:1); and in 10:9-10 and verse 13, "protected." The context of the original texts in Deuteronomy 9:4-6 and 30:11-14 from which Paul draws are not about gaining entrance into standing as Israel, but about how to behave faithfully after they have entered the next phase of their covenantal relationship so that they will prosper and be protected in the land; these covenantal commandments and resultant blessings versus curses are based upon the covenantal descent standing that they already enjoy. While the traditional choice of "saved" can arguably communicate this idea, it should be

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<sup>9</sup> For more detail, see Mark D. Nanos, "Romans 11 and Christian and Jewish Relations: Exegetical Options for Revisiting the Translation and Interpretation of this Central Text," *Criswell Theological Review* N.S. 9.2 (2012): 3-21, and the several exegetical essays for the details referenced therein. Here and throughout this essay, readers might also want to consult the notes for Mark D. Nanos, "Romans," in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 253-86. For the German translation of reflections on Romans 11 when it arose in the reading cycle see Mark D. Nanos, "Römer 11 und christlich-jüdische Beziehungen: Exegetische Optionen für eine andere Übersetzung und Interpretation des Textes," in *"So wird ganz Israel gerettet werden": Arbeitshilfe zum Israelsonntag 2014: 10. Sonntag nach Trinitatis*, ed. Hanna Lehming, et al., trans. Volker Haarmann (Düsseldorf/Hannover: Evangelisch-Lutherische Landeskirche Hannover, Evangelische Kirche im Rheinland, Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche in Norddeutschland, Begegnung von Christen und Juden Bayern, 2014), 18-25; <www.ekir.de/christen-juden>.

<sup>10</sup> In English, we speak of the doctor "saving" the patient so that they "recover," by which we do not generally mean that the doctor brought them back after they were "lost" as in dead, but that they keep them from dying, healing or protecting them so that they recover instead of remaining sick or getting worse. These matters were the focus of my 2015 Society of Biblical Literature Annual Meeting paper: "Are Jews Outside of the Covenants if Not Confessing Jesus as Messiah?: Questioning the Questions, the Options for the Answers too."

avoided in these cases because the translation “saved” has expressed the assumption that these Israelites already had lost their covenant standing for not believing in Jesus as Messiah (now challenged by *Nostra Aetate* 4), thus that they are in need of being “re-admitted” rather than “retained” in standing as the “true” or “spiritual Israel” of 9:6, the topic to which we will return.

There is good reason, then, in spite of the many positive uses to which this phrase has been put, to heretofore eschew translating this phrase as “all Israel will be *saved*,” as well as the alternative I had adopted until recently recognizing this issue myself, “*restored*,” since it arguably suffers from the same implication. The alternative, “all Israel will be *protected*,” highlights the idea that these Israelites are being and will continue to be *preserved safely* in their already *preexisting* covenantal standing in spite of present circumstances that Paul’s addressees might be tempted to interpret differently, such as in the direction of later Christian replacement theology. Following the olive tree allegory, the metaphorical implication is that “all the Israelite branches (i.e., the temporarily injured ones) will be *healed*.” Perhaps to accentuate the defamiliarizing potential of this insight we should refer to all Israel being “*safed*.”

Notice too that rather than “enemies” in 11:28, the Greek word *echthroi* should probably be translated “*estranged* (ones),” reflecting the parallel use of the widely recognized adjectival “*beloved* (ones) [*agapētoi*],” balancing the comparative contrast around which he is working.<sup>11</sup> This would represent another way of communicating Paul’s judgment that these fellow Israelites are suffering what he has been describing metaphorically as “stumbling.” They are thus “lagging behind” as well as being “broken” as in “bent” or “injured” branches to express his judgment that their not joining him in bringing the message of the gospel to the nations is a *failing*, but it is a *temporary* one in an ongoing process, and one in which God is complicit.

Yes, Paul’s view does express a criticism of these other Jews based upon his convictions about Jesus; however, this alternative highlights that Paul regards this temporary state to represent vicarious suffering on behalf of the addressees without also suggesting that they are *enemies* of the addressees or, just as importantly, that they are “*enemies of God*” (an addition the NRSV makes without any manuscript evidence). At the same time, it captures the fact that Paul is seeking to describe the role of God’s design and present appearances as different, and more promising, than the non-Jew addressees might otherwise suppose. They are witnesses of a point in an ongoing process, one that involves inscrutable elements being shaped by the divine in ways that defy even Paul’s best efforts to unravel (cf. 11:33-36). Paul remains, nevertheless, certain of a positive end result for all of his fellow Israelites: eventually, this process will conclude with their *success*. He also argues in a way that should make the idea that he saw “Israel” per se as having *rejected* the gospel or *being rejected* by God impossible to suppose, for

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<sup>11</sup> See Norman Beck, “Translations of the New Testament for Our Time,” in *Seeing Judaism Anew: Christianity’s Sacred Obligation*, ed. Mary C. Boys (Lanham, et al: A Sheed and Ward Book; Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), 200-210.

Paul identifies his own activity to represent that of *Israel* (11:1-10). Even if the task as he understands it (bringing the gospel to the nations) is only faithfully being carried out presently by *some* Israelites, it is nevertheless being carried out *by Israel!* This point parallels closely the argument in 9:1-5, and should, I suggest, guide the interpretation of verse 6, to be discussed.

In the metaphors in 11:11-16, Paul insisted that while some Israelites have "stumbled," they have not "fallen," and that while this temporary development has created an opening for some non-Israelites *to join in alongside of them* on the course, the longed for culmination ("life from the dead" in verse 15) will only be achieved when those who have thus fallen behind for a while complete the course too. Although not always recognized, there is good reason to question whether this metaphor was designed to portray Israelites in terms of *salvation*, to state the issue in later Christian terms. Rather, Paul appears to be reflecting upon the prophetic notion that when the awaited day of good news arrives the *messengers of Israel will complete the task of running to announce this news* to fellow Israelites *and* to the nations;<sup>12</sup> nevertheless, some would-be messengers are stumbling presently rather than running; that is, they are presently not expressing faithfulness to complete this task. This fits: Paul has worked with the idea that Israel's chosen role was being entrusted with God's words or oracles since he introduced the concept in 3:2, and he will discuss whether or not Israel has been faithful to that trust at the end of chapter 9, and, it seems, throughout chapter 10 and into chapter 11, where he introduces the language we are discussing. Moreover, in chapter 11 (esp. verses 20-22) he warns the Christ-following non-Jew addressees to remain faithful to their calling, to that which they believe to be true for themselves, rather than to consider it their task to judge these fellow Jews (so too in chapter 2, leading up to the declaration of 3:2).

For the sake of space, we will not discuss all of the translation choices in this metaphor of stumbling but not falling that can be improved to support rather than undermine a message of continuity (e.g., such as "misstep" rather than "transgression," "lagging behind" rather than "failure"), and move directly to the translation of the olive tree allegory that follows it in verses 17-24.<sup>13</sup> The translations here can also be improved to support Paul's affirmations of Israel's protection.

The Greek word usually translated "broken off" (formed from *ekklaō*), can be translated very differently and thereby communicate very different implications both within the allegory of the olive tree and for the analogies drawn about Paul's view of his fellow Israelites. *Ekklaō* can be translated "broken," as in when a branch is "bent" so as to suffer a "break" or "crack" in it; although injured, it remains on the tree. Rather than contradict the prior metaphor, as if Paul had just stated rather than denied that these Israelites had indeed stumbled so as to "fall," which imagining limbs broken or cut *off* instead communicates (!), the allegory

<sup>12</sup> See Isa 62:6-12.

<sup>13</sup> Examples outside of the allegory are several as well, not least of which is that "disobedience" in verses 30-32 can be understood instead as "unconvinced," which better represents the disposition of most Israelites, versus the idea of "rejecting," as if convinced but unwilling to humbly accept the truth.

can remain consistent, emphasizing a temporary problematic development, one that can be described as present alienation from faithfully accomplishing the assigned task rather than as abandoning it, and thereafter being abandoned by God.<sup>14</sup> I suggest translating *apistia* (11:23) in terms of the rest of the Israelites' "lack of faithfulness" (at this point) to carry out Israel's calling to announce the message to the nations, not as if at issue in the metaphor is "unbelief" in Jesus as Messiah per se. "Unbelief" in Jesus would not make sense of the threat to the wild branch being rebuked, and thus to the corresponding comment about the broken Israelite branches: it is not failure to continue to believe in Jesus that would lead to the wild branch being cut out, but unfaithfulness to the responsibility it has toward the suffering branches, which is not to grow arrogant toward them and suppose it has replaced them as the recipients of God's gifts and calling. Moreover, following the allegory, the usual translation of verse 25 communicates that these Israelites have been "hardened," which has a negative valence and is often even analogized with the *hardening* of Pharaoh's heart, even though that is based upon a different Greek word (*sklērunō*; 9:18). Paul uses a form of the verb *pōroō* in verse 25. This is a medical term used to describe the temporary, positive process of a body or tree mending a broken element by creating a "callus."<sup>15</sup> A bent or cracked limb is "callused" to "protect" the injured area from further damage until it can be fully "healed"; in the meantime, it can continue to function within the tree toward its goal of producing fruit. "All Israel will be healed, protected, preserved, kept safe."

As we have surveyed, Paul concluded in chapter 11 that the present lack of participation by some (even many) Israelites (Jews) in the process of taking the message to the nations was part of a temporary stage in a larger design, one during which God was protecting these Israelites based upon the promises made to them through their ancestors, which was in keeping with the way that he began his argument in chapter 9. Now, let us see if we can read the verses in chapter 9 within the stream of this propositional logic, rather than as if it undermined it or set out an entirely different message.

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<sup>14</sup> The notion of the natural branches being broken "off" is an element in the replacement theological proposition that the wild shoot (note, singular for Paul, but almost always referred to by interpreters in the plural as shoots or branches) is grafted into the tree where the natural branches were pruned off (NRSV goes so far as to invent, "in their place"), when Paul wrote "among them [*en autois*]" (verse 17). Problematic too is the notion that the shoot is grafted into "Israel," and thus the idea that the gentiles become members of Israel, when Paul does not identify the tree as Israel but Israelites as branches in the tree, the new shoot drawing from the same root (this is, notably, often the first basis for upholding the idea that the Christian non-Jew is now a part of Israel, however qualified, often as "true" or "spiritual," etc.). Along the same line, this metaphorical language is treated as if a literal theological statement and repeated endlessly without reflection on the fact that humans are not branches and are not grafted into trees (thus representing a dead metaphor). For the complete argument see Mark D. Nanos, "'Broken Branches': A Pauline Metaphor Gone Awry? (Romans 11:11-36)," in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11*, ed. Florian Wilk and J. Ross Wagner (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 339-376.

<sup>15</sup> Mark D. Nanos, "'Callused,' Not 'Hardened': Paul's Revelation of Temporary Protection Until All Israel Can Be Healed," in *Reading Paul in Context: Explorations in Identity Formation*, ed. Kathy Ehrensperger and J. Brian Tucker (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 52-73.

**The Affirmation of These Jews as Israelite  
"brothers and sisters" still in Covenantal Standing (9:1-5)**

Suddenly, at the marker we recognize as 9:1, Paul changes his topic from that of chapters 5 through 8.<sup>16</sup> He returns to the affirmation of the advantage of being a member of Israel—specifically, a Jew by genealogical descent—raised much earlier, at 3:2: Jews are “entrusted with the words/oracles of God”! The reason for suddenly addressing the implications of this topic is not self-evident.

The nature of the argument Paul commences may suggest that he wants to gainsay what might be inferred from the conclusion of the argument in chapter 8 about the certainty of God’s commitment to those chosen in Christ, including those from the nations making up Paul’s target audience. He seems to recognize they might reason that the corollary to their newfound assurance of God’s commitment to their success, regardless of present appearances and troubles, can be calculated by them in zero-sum terms, whereby their good fortune is imagined to necessarily entail the replacement of the good fortune of someone else.<sup>17</sup> If so, Paul appears concerned that these non-Jews might infer what Christian theologians from the second century on in fact did advocate, that is, that Christ-following non-Jews (later: Christians) had become Israel, the *true* Israel of God, having replaced any Israelites not convinced that Jesus was the Christ—regarded as “rejecting the truth” and thereby being “rejected” by God.<sup>18</sup> Whatever the case, Paul launches into a spirited rebuttal of any such thinking in the first five verses of chapter 9.

Although Paul affirms the continuation of God’s gifts and calling to his fellow Jews, he also expressed sadness and ongoing concern for their wellbeing. In language reminiscent of the prayer of Moses for solidarity with the fate of his fellow Israelites who were turning to other gods while he was receiving the commandments at Mt. Sinai (Ex 32:31-33), Paul asserts that he would vow to be accursed, cut off from Christ, for the sake of his kinsmen “according to the flesh,” that is, by genealogical descent. He does not explain here what it is that leads to this display of empathy, but based on what follows, presumably it is on behalf of those of his fellow Jews who do not share his convictions about Jesus being the Messiah, perhaps more specifically their failure—from his perspective, yet, at this

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<sup>16</sup> In view of the focus of this essay I am not engaging in detail with the various alternatives for who is asking or answering questions when diatribe is recognized to be at work here, but Paul introduces issues by way of one or more invented dialogue partners. Judgments about which positions Paul upholds versus those to be attributed to his dialogue partner (and whether more than one partner or alternative positions), and who he (or they) represent(s) remains controversial, and the various implications are too many to discuss here.

<sup>17</sup> This same concern surfaces in the argument of chapter 11, such as in the diatribe question in verse 19 attributed to the wild branch.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969). The discursive practice of describing Israel rejecting and being rejected by God continues to this day, which is readily witnessed by consulting the commentaries on this chapter.

time, anyway—to join him in declaring the gospel to the nations.<sup>19</sup> Paul’s qualification of kinship in terms of “flesh” is often turned into a binary contrast to suggest that his relationship to his fellow Jews is no longer one of “spirit.” But the next statement undermines any such reasoning, or should. Many of the elements listed are not only spiritual in nature, but affirm shared supernatural attributes as fellow Israelites and servants of God (e.g., to whom the practice of the cult, legislation, glory, etc., are entrusted, which are spiritual in nature, just as Paul declares *ho nomos* spiritual in 7:14).

Similarly, appeal to Paul’s deep concern is regularly noted to argue that he must see his fellow Israelites as no longer Israel to make sense of it, or as those who are not the ideal, legitimate (“real”) Jews. If that were so, Paul certainly confuses the point at the most basic level by continuing to refer to these others as Jews and Israel throughout the letter, and he does the same in his other letters too. Why not refer to the addressees directly as Israel and Jews and the others as formerly such, or as apostates, or something similar, if that is the way that he already sees the situation to have become, and presumes that his target audience does as well? Paul betrays the fact that he does not consider them to have lost their covenant standing and thus be in need of “being saved just like Gentiles,” to use the common phrasing. Just before verse 6, in verse 4, Paul declares unabashedly: “who are Israelites”! One might expect, based upon the long tradition of supersessionism and replacement theology—a tradition that appeals especially to verses 6 and following—that Paul would have begun with: “who *were* Israelites”!<sup>20</sup> But he does not.

Instead, Paul next launches into listing many specific elements of their continued identity as Israelites. Again, one might expect him to have qualified these as *former* if he saw his compatriots in later Christian terms, as having lost their standing in covenant as Israel unless they were re-admitted (“saved”) following a change of confession about Jesus. But Paul describes the situation in terms of continuity, even if at the same time with serious concern. This suggests that Paul is expressing empathy based upon a potential future development, perhaps what they might suffer as Israelites for failure to have that change of conviction. Logically, that would mean that he saw them as still Israel, remaining in covenantal standing but in need of “safe-keeping”: if punished, however severely, this would

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<sup>19</sup> Gaston, *Paul and the Torah*, 116-34, 135-50, raises the issue that Paul is discussing the declaration of the word to the nations by Israel, not its salvation, which I continue to find likely throughout Romans.

<sup>20</sup> I have argued similar logic at work in 2:25-29, against the consensus readings, in Mark D. Nanos, “Paul’s Non-Jews Do Not Become ‘Jews,’ But Do They Become ‘Jewish’?: Reading Romans 2:25–29 Within Judaism, Alongside Josephus,” *Journal of the Jesus Movement in its Jewish Setting (JJMJS)* 1.1 (2014): 26-53; <<http://www.jjmjs.org/>>. Notice, too, the commentary habit to derive from Paul’s affirmation of identity as Israelites that he was seeking to drive a wedge between that and their identity as Jews; cf. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (WBC 38b; Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 533: “The choice of title is obviously deliberate, ‘Israelites’ being preferred to ‘Jew’ (contrast 2:17, 28-29; 3:29).” In the direction I am arguing, see also R. Kendall Soulen “They are Israelites’: The Priority of the Present Tense for Jewish-Christian Relations,” in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9-11*, ed. F. Wilk and J. R. Wagner (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 497-504.

represent discipline according to covenantal (family) terms as Israel, which is not the same as being dismissed from standing as Israel.<sup>21</sup>

Consider the list of summary features Paul affirms to still apply to these "Israelites": "and of whom are the sonship (i.e., adoption), and the glory (i.e., God's presence [Heb. *kovod*]), and the covenants (e.g., Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, later prophetic, and these include the promise of the land, blessings, as well as discipline when warranted to allow to repent and retain covenant standing, etc.), and the giving of the legislation (to Moses, i.e., Torah guidance), and the cult (i.e., Temple sacrificial system of worship [Heb. *avodah*]), and the promises (i.e., to the fathers, which would logically cover some elements not in this list, such as the land, and the word entrusted around which he is working [see 3:2]; note the language in 11:29, 'the gifts and the calling of God,' to concisely cover this same ground),<sup>5</sup> of whom (are) the patriarchs (i.e., the fathers: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob/Israel; hence, the affirmation that they are "the seed" in the argument to come, not merely of genealogical descent [flesh] but also of promise), and from whom is the Messiah (Christ, the Davidic covenant, see 1:1-5), who (is [an Israelite]) according to the flesh (i.e., by genealogical descent). May he who is God over all, be blessed forever. Amen ('it is so,' 'let it be so,' indicating acceptance of what has been stated, although it might appear presently to the addressees to be otherwise)." There is not space here for further reflection on these many elements, but obviously there is much to explore for a full assessment of Paul's view of current covenantal standing of his fellow Jews, and thus, about what it was specifically that so deeply concerned him.

Largely missing in the conversation about this passage, too, is Paul's description of those about whom he is concerned as "brothers [and sisters]." Before we move to verse 6 and the problems that arise there, it is interesting to note that Paul uses many of the same terms to refer both to his fellow Israelites and to his fellow Christ-followers.<sup>22</sup>

<i>Identification</i>	<i>for Christ-followers</i>	<i>for Non-Christ Following Jews/Israelites</i>
brethren	1:13; 8:29	9:3
adoption as sons	8:15	9:4
children of God	8:16-17	9:8
have the glory	8:18	9:4
Abraham as father	4:10-17	4:10-17
seed of Abraham	9:7-8; 4:13-18	9:7-8; 11:1
beloved of God	1:7	11:28
called	9:25; 8:28; 1:16	9:7, 24; 11:29
elect	8:28, 33	9:11
foreknown	8:29	11:2

<sup>21</sup> See 2 Macc 6:12-17; cf. Ps 94:12; Prov 3:11-12; Jer 30:11; Lam 3:31-33; Jdt 8:27; Wis 12:1-2, 26; Pss. Sol. 10.1; 13.7; 16.1-5.

<sup>22</sup> Many similar dynamics are covered in Mark D. Nanos, *The Mystery of Romans: The Jewish Context of Paul's Letter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996); this list is on p. 112.

The idea that Paul sees these as two distinct identity groups, as former versus current family, so central to the idea of replacement theology, is not in keeping with the way that Paul's reasoning reveals itself on these matters—he argues for this *and* that, not this *or* that. These non-Jews (non-Israelites) who become members of the people of God through Jesus Christ join together with Jews (Israelites), who remain the people of God whether Christ-followers or not; they do not displace them. The implications for reading Paul within Judaism are many, they guide the assumptions at work for the modern reader, starting from what one assumes were the assumptions at work for Paul and his original intended reader.

### Translating and Interpreting 9:6-16

Suddenly, the reader of this passage encounters a denial of a position that does not represent what he had been arguing for anyway, betraying that he assumes his audience may reason in a very different way than he does: (NRSV v. 6a): “It is not as though the word of God had failed.” A more literal translation for “had failed” would be “has fallen [*ekpeptōken*].” The usual interpretation is based upon the idea that the Jews *rejected* the *gospel* and thus that they have been rejected by God, that they are not “saved.” But Paul has not introduced the idea that the word had gone to Israel, so there is no basis for the addressees to suppose that the question concerns whether the word had failed to reach or convince these Israelites. Rather, he has written that the advantage of being a Jew and circumcised involved being entrusted with the special role of being the *messengers entrusted* to bring God's word *to the nations* (3:2; 10:15; cf. Isa 52:7-10). If those whom Paul has just insisted remain Israelites, with all that he lists still applying to them, but if they do not presently proclaim the words of God entrusted to them (that being the gospel, as understood by Paul and his addressees), this would logically raise an objection. If the plan for which Paul has argued is based upon Israel carrying out its trust to declare the word to the nations, then it is logical to ask how the nations will hear it, and whether their own fate can be tied to such a contingency. Put in these terms, Paul's language choice of “falling” appeals to the same metaphorical concern expressed in chapter 11 in terms of some stumbling, to which Paul also responds with the assurance that this is not the case (vv. 11-15). The issue is one of “faithfulness” to carry out the task “entrusted” to Israel (yet, or not), thus cognates of faithfulness or loyalty or trust are used for cognates of *pistis* throughout this essay, rather than faith or belief.

Then, in the rest of verse 6—as usually translated and understood, that is—Paul ostensibly introduces the (confusing if not entirely inscrutable) idea that these Israelites are not actually still members of Israel: “For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel” (NRSV). As already discussed, these translations not only introduce a major discontinuity into Paul's argument, but they have been used to communicate that Paul regards Israelite identity according to genealogical descent to be transcended now by a new concept of Israel, one consisting of Christians, primarily composed of non-Jews but including any Jews who have become Chris-

tians (and, usually, certainly after a few centuries, if they have disavowed observance of Torah and the practice of Judaism, of Jewish communal life).<sup>23</sup>

Before we consider the literal translation and several alternative ways to understand Paul's statement, let us survey the case that he makes following this sentence, toward which we should expect him to be pointing.

### *The Message(s) of Verses 7-16:*

A brief survey of these verses is all we have space to offer, but the message is relatively straightforward, even though elements of the traditional translation and interpretation are not. In verses 7-9, Paul argues that although Abraham had children who were not through Sarah, those descended through her constituted the promised descendant line ("the seed"). Again, we have a similar appeal to the certainty that God's word will not be circumvented, in this case by the fact that Abraham had other children than those through Sarah. Rather than suggesting that Paul is opening up the description of "Israel" in verse 6 to include children not of his genealogical descent, as the traditional view upholds it to be, the point Paul makes is that the line is narrowed down to only those born of Sarah's line, that is, through Isaac. That supports the idea he has asserted in verses 4-5, that these descendants remain the seed to whom the promise was made even if some are not discharging (yet) the concomitant responsibility to declare the word. It also maintains the consideration that events may be unfolding in ways that seem random or even contrary to expectations, but that this all proceeds based upon God's timetable, "at the appointed time" (v. 9). Verses 10-13 form a unit that strengthens the point ("and again...").<sup>24</sup>

Is Paul driving a wedge between calling (grace and election/choice) and flesh (genealogical descent), or rather explaining that God chose a particular line of genealogical descendants to undertake a special task as "the seed"? I propose the latter. Notice that being chosen by grace and being genealogical descendants are not presented as binaries in this argument, although that is what one finds commonly asserted in the commentaries. The overall point is that the seed continues to be narrowed down through Abraham's genealogical descendants without regard for their activity, good or bad, and before any such activity has even taken place from which to influence God's choice: it is simply a result of God's sovereign choice that Isaac's wife Rebecca's younger son Jacob (Israel) rather than the

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<sup>23</sup> See James Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: A Study in the Origins of Antisemitism* (New York: Atheneum, 1979).

<sup>24</sup> Interestingly, the German Protestant liturgical reading for which I initially researched this passage does not include verses 11-13, skipping from verses 1-10 to 14-16. That decision may contribute to as well as reflect the traditional interpretive judgment that the historically descended Israelites in question are not the promised seed on the basis of failure to *perform* correctly (in this case, the activity of believing in Jesus as Christ, or, alternatively, and contextually more likely, the task of carrying forth the gospel of Christ to the nations [has the word of God "fallen"?]). However, the traditional decision to attribute the identity of (true) Israel in verse 6 to those who are not of that genealogical descent line (i.e., Christ-following non-Israelites) does so at the expense of disregarding the text that Paul wrote to explain his position, in this case by deleting these passages from the reading!

first-born Esau will inherit the promise. When read together, verses 10-13 confirm that *in spite of performance*, good or bad, God's word of promise to the specific descent line of Israelites—from which those Israelites Paul has been defending as Israel in spite of their present disagreement with him and his addressees about the meaning of Jesus—that they are entrusted with God's words, remains guaranteed. And when read together, this leads to exactly what Paul will declare to be achieved by this argument in verses 14-16!

Verse 14 poses the logical question that the argument preceding it has raised: *is God unjust* to choose whom God wills independent of behavior, whether good or bad, or even yet performed—specifically (although perhaps not as salient if the reader skips verses 11-13), that only certain members of the line of Abraham through Jacob/Israel will inherit the promises made to Abraham, thus that these subsequent descendants and not others are the legitimate claimants to the promises made to the “seed”? In verses 14-29, the answer is pronounced dramatically: God is sovereign and chooses accordingly.

There is one specific point in verse 16 that should not go unnoticed before we turn back to verse 6. The issue of God's sovereign choice is contextualized around the fact that it is independent of whether one wants God's mercy or pity or not, and, whether or not one is “running [*trechontos*]” (“Laufen”; Luther 1912). The usual English translations (“exertion” NRSV) obscure the metaphorical nature of the comment, which does not help the reader recognize that Paul continues to work around the image of whether one is faithfully carrying out the entrusted task of bringing the word of God to the nations. The point is that God shows mercy to whom God wills, to whom the promises have been guaranteed by the line of genealogical descent (by flesh), in spite of whether any given Israelites have successfully been doing so, or not!

Paul's point is the opposite of the theological idea that has somehow emerged that he is removing the Israelites who do not believe in Jesus as Messiah and thus do not proclaim him to the nations (yet, he appears to maintain) from standing as (true) “Israel,” based largely upon the message of verse 6 as usually translated and interpreted. Ironically, Paul's argument otherwise supports the commonly encountered theological impulse to highlight God's choice in spite of human effort. No less ironic, Paul's focus is upon God's choice of Israelites as Israel on these terms, rather than being based upon a supposed failure to *perform* adequately as paving the way for their replacement by Christians—who imagine themselves to do so independent of their own performance, good or bad, but on the basis of *grace and faith alone!*<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the traditional views do not attend to

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<sup>25</sup> Wilhelm Pauck, ed., *Luther: Lectures on Romans*, trans. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), 265, translates Luther's comments on 9:6-9 as follows: “This word is spoken against the presumptuousness of the Jews and on behalf of grace, so that all proud confidence in righteousness and good works may be undone. For the Jews want to be regarded as the children of the Kingdom because they are the children of Abraham.” Continuing on p. 266, after other comments: “... one does not become a son of God and an heir of the promise by descent but by the gracious election of God. Thus and only thus, the Spirit and the grace of God can arise as the pride of the flesh is put down. So then, why does man take pride in his merits and good works? They cannot in any way please God, because they are good and meritorious, but only because God has elected from eternity

the contextual argument that the choices of God here are related to those chosen for a special *task*, not about who is chosen to be saved, as usually described. This is highlighted in verses 17-24, where the point made about God's choice of Pharaoh and other vessels (for wrath or mercy) concerns how God *uses* them, not whether God saves them.<sup>26</sup> These examples illustrate that the purpose of things—and thus determination of appropriate thinking and behavior—cannot be judged simply on the basis of how circumstances might presently appear, but must be based upon trust in God's ultimate promises; hence, any given events along the way may even be contrary indicators (as too might be birth order, against the prevailing normal expectations of who will inherit).

### *The Message(s) of Verse 6:*

Now that we have surveyed the context, let us return to verse 6. We have already discussed how the first sentence of the verse (6a), translated literally, suggests that Paul is referring metaphorically to whether the word of God has *fallen* in the sense that many of the Israelites have not joined Paul and other Christ-followers as messengers bringing the gospel—the news of good awaited—to the nations. No, he insisted, the word has not fallen, because it is going out through agents like Paul; thus, Israel *is* carrying out its trust, even if not every Israelite. I propose that the rest of the verse—which is a new sentence that consists of two clauses (6b-c)—is best understood in the context set up by the first sentence, even though that is not apparent in the interpretive tradition.

A more literal translation of the second sentence offers the opportunity to explore Paul's message in several directions. Literally, the sentence reads: "For not all the ones from Israel these ones Israel [*ou gar pantes oi ex Israēl houtoi Israēl*]." The grammatical construction and lack of specificity leave it to the interpreter to fill out the translation from working assumptions about Paul's intended message. In addition to recognizing that there would not have been

that they would please him. We do good only on the basis of gratitude, because our works do not make us good, but our goodness or, rather, the goodness of God makes us good and our actions as well."

Notice not only the introduction of pride in works here, but also the catch-22 that emerges for Jews, who are accused of trust that they have been freely chosen, witnessed by their genealogical descent to the line of fathers to whom the promises of their relationship were made, and simultaneously accused of seeking to earn God's favor. As members of this family line, in covenant with God, should they not be expected to seek to do what is right, or otherwise to be disciplined? So what is the problem with seeking to do good works if in a covenant relationship with one who instructs to do good works? It seems that, in addition to the need to introduce Jewish works-righteousness so as to argue against it, Luther's reasoning depends upon introducing the idea that a Jew must celebrate God's choice of themselves independent of Abrahamic descent; in other words, as if he or she is a gentile, and thus not already in a covenantal relationship that requires them to behave properly to continue that relationship in good terms. A similar logic appears to be at work in popular evangelical presentations of the gospel.

<sup>26</sup> The issue in the discourse beginning at verse 16 revolves around defending God's justice, which includes references to Pharaoh and vessels of wrath and mercy as well as the Northern tribes versus Judahites, not to discuss who is "saved," but the ways that God uses different people and means to achieve God's ends.

punctuation, that being a later interpretive addition, notice that Paul does not provide the verbs. That Paul is using Israel in two ways or dismissing some he has just described as Israelites in verses 4-5 from identification as Israel is not as self-evident in the literal translation as it seems to be in prevailing translations. Rather, the basic idea seems to be that there are some who are not from Israel, or some who are not from the narrowed down line of Israel, in a way that is analogous to there being some who are not of the line of Abraham's seed who will receive the promises, those not descended through Isaac and Jacob (Israel). As we reviewed, that is the argument that he makes after verse 6 (vv. 7-16).

It is not clear who are "not... from Israel" in 6b and who "[are] Israel" in 6c. I suggest that this convoluted language is linked to Paul's denial in the first clause of the idea that the word of God might have *fallen* (in 6a).

"These ones Israel" of the second clause (6c) seems most likely to refer to Paul's fellow Jews who have not joined him in declaring the conviction that Jesus is the Messiah, those whom he has just been describing in verses 1-5 before the "For" introducing verse 6. It seems likely that the verb should be supplied to read as an affirmation, rather than a denial as traditionally presented: "these ones *are* Israel." Who then are the "all" who are "not... *from* [ek] Israel" in the first clause (6b)? And where shall we fill in the verbs for our native languages to translate these clauses, which will govern what is meant?

### Two Alternative Translations for Verse 6b-c

1) The first alternative to consider is to take the reference in the first clause to be to the *non-Jews* who are *followers of Jesus* about whose assurances he had been writing in chapter 8, all the ones who are in Christ Jesus but "not... from Israel."<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the word of God has not fallen, it has gone out into the world and been received by some from the nations, some who are not from Israel but who now have God's assurances of receiving the promises made to Abraham's seed as the ones anticipated in the idea of him being "a blessing to all of the nations" (4:16-18). If understood in this direction, then the literal translation would read: "**For all are not the ones from Israel[;] these ones are Israel.**" An explanatory paraphrase might read: "**For all** [the ones God chooses who can rest assured of God's commitment to themselves, which includes non-Israelites who have become followers of Jesus Christ (i.e., the subject of chapter 8 that preceded his argument in chapters 9-11 to introduce his concern about those of Israel who were not helping to bring the gospel message to these non-Jews)] **are not the ones** [among the chosen of Israel presently bringing the message to the nations, such as is Paul, but who do constitute the ones just defended in verses 4-5] **from Israel[;]** [on the other hand, however] **these ones** [the Israelites of verses 4-5] **are** [legitimate members of] **Israel** [i.e., they are the ones chosen to bring the word]."

<sup>27</sup> Gaston, "Israel's Enemies," in *Paul and the Torah*, 94 and n. 77, suggests "those outside of Israel" in the sense of non-Jews who are Abraham's descendants also.

Paul would be arguing that the word entrusted to Israel has not fallen, even if some Israelites are stumbling presently rather than carrying it successfully to the nations alongside of Paul. This affirmation and the argument he makes following it continue to affirm the "amen" at the end of verse 5, that what Paul has just asserted about these Israelites is true. It also accords with his insistence in verses 1-3 that he is telling the truth when he expresses grave concern for their protection during this period, for, as he will express in chapter 11, he fears that these non-Jews might behave in such an arrogant manner so as to turn his fellow Jews away from considering to "emulate" him in this ministry to the nations (11:13-14). One advantage of making the distinction between non-Israelites and Israelites within the first clause is that it anticipates the argument to which Paul will turn after 9:16, after he has made the case for a narrowed down definition of who are the promised seed within the descent group. He introduces an analogy to the distinction between the northern tribes and Judah in order to explain how God can choose those from the nations as well as Israel. Another advantage is that it makes a definitive statement against the idea that non-Israelite Christ-followers are considered Israel here.

2) The second alternative is less complicated and follows Paul's word order exactly; I consider this the most probable reading. Both clauses could refer to those Israelites about whom he had been writing in the previous verses, all the ones who are not joining him in his convictions about Jesus. Again, the exact wording Paul uses is: "**For not all [are] the ones from Israel[;] these ones [are] Israel.**" I suggest Paul meant: "**For not all** [the Israelites of vv. 4-5] **are the ones from Israel** [who are presently bringing the message to the nations (although some, like Paul, are doing so successfully, so the word of God has not fallen even if some Israelites are presently stumbling rather than completing the task)];] [nevertheless] **these ones** [these Israelites who are stumbling, v. 4] **are** [legitimate members of] **Israel** [who should carry out this task, but failure to do so (yet) does not alter their legitimate standing as Israel, because they come through the line of the promised seed]."

Note that the contrast in the pronouns between the clauses (*oi* [the ones]/*houtos* [these ones]) is maintained in this translation (also in the first alternative), and that these pronouns link back nicely to the pronoun in verse 4: "*hoitines* [which ones] are Israelites." Together, these various ways of discussing the present anomalous situation communicate that the word *has not fallen* in spite of some Israelites presently tripping rather than successfully (i.e., faithfully) bringing it to the nations (as will be clarified further in chapter 11). The point is emphasized in the analogy drawn in verses 7-16: neither is it the case that all the seed of Abraham are the ones who will inherit the promises as "the seed" through Isaac and Jacob—that is by God's choice, and remains the case in spite of any appearances to the contrary. The analogy should not be conflated; the argument it supports is not that some of these Israelites not running are not Israel, but rather that there can be differences between legitimate Israelites, just as there are between those taking the message now and those who are not; nevertheless, they are all the Israelites promised those things listed in verses 4-5, and again, differently

stated, in 11:25-32. Just as the prophets spoke to Israel, so now Paul writes: Things are not always as they appear to be—trusting God’s eternal promises and patterns helps to avoid drawing the wrong conclusions and provides the basis for thinking and behaving appropriately instead, steadfastly anticipating what will take place “at the proper time.”

### Conclusion

The word entrusted to Israel has not fallen, even if some Israelites are presently stumbling rather than faithfully carrying it to the nations alongside of Paul. In time, Paul apparently expects them to regain their step and join him in the task, which is what he will argue in chapter 11 in more detail and by way of several metaphors.

Paul’s appeal to the irrevocable covenant identity of his kinspeople need not ostensibly be revoked by the insertion of a replacement theology translation choice. **These ones are Israel.** For Paul, these Israelites stand in need of protection during present circumstances, but they remain those whom God has chosen to carry out a task for which promises have been made, and for the completion of which gifts have been given. When translated in either of the alternative ways proposed, Romans 9:6 supports rather than sabotages the promises Paul affirmed in the preceding argument of verses 1-5, and again in his subsequent arguments in chapter 11. Moreover, these alternatives corroborate rather than encumber appeals to these texts to substantiate calls for a new era of respectfulness in Christian concepts and discourses about as well as relations with Jews.