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# INTRODUCTION

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This debate-book is a window into a larger debate about how the NT uses the OT, especially regarding how the church relates to Israel.<sup>1</sup> Is the nation Israel a *type*? Is the church the new Israel? Is Jesus the true Israel?<sup>2</sup> This book addresses that larger debate by focusing on Romans 9–11—a passage in a letter that we think is the single most important piece of literature in the history of the world. When you do biblical and systematic theology, just about all roads lead through Romans. “Paul’s letter to the church at Rome is the greatest letter ever written because of its great impact in history, its grand theology about Christ,

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1. For an introduction to how the New Testament uses the Old, see G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lunde, eds., *Three Views on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament*, Counterpoints (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008); G. K. Beale, *Handbook on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Exegesis and Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012); Douglas J. Moo and Andrew David Naselli, “The Problem of the New Testament’s Use of the Old Testament,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 702–46.
  2. Cf. Michael J. Vlach, “What Does Christ as ‘True Israel’ Mean for the Nation Israel? A Critique of the Non-Dispensational Understanding,” *MSJ* 23 (2012): 43–54; Brent E. Parker, “The Israel-Christ-Church Relationship,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenant Theologies*, eds. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2016), 39–68.

and its practical instructions for Christian living.”<sup>3</sup> Romans 9–11 is an ideal passage to consider in light of the larger debate because Paul frequently quotes the OT and addresses Israelites and Gentiles in light of what God promised Israel in the OT.

## 1. What This Debate-Book Is About

Paul’s letter to the Romans takes about sixty minutes to read aloud. And what we refer to as chapters 9–11 takes about fifteen minutes to read aloud.<sup>4</sup> Romans 9–11 is about one-fourth of Paul’s magnificent letter. That one-fourth is what this debate-book is about: three views on Romans 9–11.

“Everything about Romans 9–11 is controversial,” notes N. T. Wright.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, we do not have space in this book to debate “everything about Romans 9–11.” One controversial aspect of this passage, for example, is whether 9:6–29 refers to God’s electing to save individuals (i.e., the “U” for unconditional election in the Calvinist acronym TULIP) or God’s electing to save a group (i.e., corporate election).<sup>6</sup> But that issue is not what this book is preoccupied with. (Everyone who contributes to this book agrees that 9:6–29 supports that God unconditionally chooses to save individuals.) This book focuses more broadly on how Romans 9–11 helps us understand Israel’s role in the Bible’s storyline and the nature of the

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3. Benjamin L. Merkle, “Is Romans Really the Greatest Letter Ever Written?,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 11, no. 3 (2007): 31.

4. “Chapters” in the Bible go back only to the 1200s, and “verses” didn’t exist until about 1550.

5. N. T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), 10:620.

6. E.g., John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1993), esp. 56–73; William W. Klein, *The New Chosen People: A Corporate View of Election*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), esp. 138–40, 146–48, 161, 175–77, 181–82; Thomas R. Schreiner, “Does Romans 9 Teach Individual Election unto Salvation? Some Exegetical and Theological Reflections,” *JETS* 36 (1993): 25–40; Brian J. Abasciano, “Corporate Election in Romans 9: A Reply to Thomas Schreiner,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 351–71; Thomas R. Schreiner, “Corporate and Individual Election in Romans 9: A Response to Brian Abasciano,” *JETS* 49 (2006): 373–86.

people of God in that story. This book's three main essays attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What is the big idea in Romans 9–11? What is Paul trying to do? How does the passage function in Paul's letter?
2. Who is Israel? What role does Israel play? Why?
3. What does Romans 9–11 imply for biblical theology?<sup>7</sup> What does it imply about Israel's role in biblical theology? How does it contribute to how we understand typology and the relationship between the covenants?<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Tracing the Argument of Romans 9–11

Romans 9–11 opens with Paul's grief (9:1–2) that the majority of Israelites have rejected the Messiah (9:3; cf. 9:30–10:4; 11:1, 11, 20, 23) even though they had unique privileges (9:4–5). That introduces the tension that Romans 9–11 addresses: (a) Israel's unbelief and (b) Israel's privileged status. God made promises to Israel, yet Israel is “cut off from Christ” (9:3a). So does that mean God's word is unreliable? Has God's word failed? No, “It is not as though the word of God has failed” (9:6a). That is the thesis of Romans 9–11. That thesis was so important to Paul's original audience because the predominantly Gentile church in Rome needed to think rightly about themselves in relation to ethnic Israelites and treat Israelites accordingly: “Do not be arrogant toward the branches” (11:18a).<sup>9</sup> In the history of salvation, God

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7. Biblical theology is a way of analyzing and synthesizing the Bible that makes organic, salvation-historical connections with the whole canon on its own terms, especially regarding how the Old and New Testaments integrate and climax in Christ. For an introduction to biblical theology, see Chapter 9 in Andrew David Naselli, *How to Understand and Apply the New Testament: Twelve Steps from Exegesis to Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2017), 230–63.
  8. Typology analyzes how New Testament persons, events, and institutions (i.e., antitypes) fulfill Old Testament persons, events, and institutions (i.e., types) by repeating the Old Testament situations at a deeper, climactic level in salvation history.
  9. I intentionally refer to “ethnic Israelites” rather than “the nation Israel” because “ethnic Israelites” more closely corresponds with the language in Romans 9–11. *Nation* connotes that ethnic Israelites inhabit a particular country or territory.

set aside Israel in order to save more Gentiles and thus provoke Israel to jealousy and thus save more Israelites (11:11–32).

### 3. Two Features in Romans 9–11 Significant for This Book’s Debate

Two features of this passage are particularly significant for this debate–book:

#### 1. Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9–11

Romans 9–11 is probably the single most important passage in the NT about how early Christians put their Bibles together. The strongest evidence for this is how Paul uses the OT throughout the passage to support his point. Not every instance of Paul’s quoting the OT directly relates to what this debate–book addresses (e.g., quoting Ps. 14:4 in Rom. 10:18), but many do. Figure 1 displays each time Paul quotes OT in Romans 9–11.<sup>10</sup>

Fig. 1. Old Testament Quotations in Romans 9–11

| Romans | Old Testament Quoted | Paul’s Point   |
|--------|----------------------|--|
| 9:7    | Gen. 21:12           | Ethnic and spiritual Israel are distinct.                                |
| 9:9    | Gen. 18:10, 14       | God caused Isaac’s birth to fulfill his promise to Abraham.              |
| 9:12   | Gen. 25:23           | God chose Jacob over Esau after their conception but before their birth. |
| 9:13   | Mal. 1:2–3           | God chose Jacob and rejected Esau.                                       |
| 9:15   | Exod. 33:19          | God can have mercy on whomever he wants.                                 |

10. The table’s third column succinctly summarizes Paul’s points at the risk of oversimplifying them, and it is consistent with the exegesis in Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 574–744. Figure 1 is from Andrew David Naselli, *From Typology to Doxology: Paul’s Use of Isaiah and Job in Romans 11:34–35* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 142–43, with one change: I tweaked the entry for Romans 11:26–27 to be impartial (used with permission).

| Romans  | Old Testament Quoted | Paul's Point  |
|---------|----------------------|---|
| 9:17    | Exod. 9:16           | God can harden whomever he wants to accomplish his purposes.  |
| 9:25    | Hos. 2:23            | God will include Gentiles as his beloved people.  |
| 9:26    | Hos. 1:10            | God will include Gentiles as his children.  |
| 9:27–28 | Isa. 10:22–23        | God will judge ethnic Israel and save only a remnant.   |
| 9:29    | Isa. 1:9             | God will preserve ethnic Israel's remnant by leaving "a seed."  |
| 9:33    | Isa. 28:16; 8:14     | Ethnic Israel will stumble over the Messiah, failing to believe in him.   |
| 10:5    | Lev. 18:5            | Righteousness by practicing the law is impossible.  |
| 10:6–8  | Deut. 30:12–14       | Righteousness by faith is accessible.   |
| 10:11   | Isa. 28:16           | Faith is necessary for deliverance from judgment (i.e., salvation). Righteousness by faith is universally accessible for "whoever believes in" Jesus—whether ethnic Israel or Gentiles. |
| 10:13   | Joel 2:32            | Righteousness by faith is universally accessible for "whoever will call on the name of the Lord"—whether ethnic Israel or Gentiles.   |
| 10:15   | Isa. 52:7            | Ethnic Israel's rejection of Jesus is inexcusable because God fulfilled the first and second conditions for calling on Jesus: God sent preachers, and the preachers preached.           |
| 10:16   | Isa. 53:1            | Ethnic Israel's rejection of Jesus is inexcusable because they are responsible for not fulfilling the fourth condition for calling on Jesus: They must believe in Christ.               |
| 10:18   | Ps. 19:4             | Ethnic Israel's rejection of Jesus is inexcusable because God fulfilled the third condition for calling on Jesus: They have heard the preaching.  |

| Romans   | Old Testament Quoted                 | Paul's Point   |
|----------|--------------------------------------|--|
| 10:19    | Deut. 32:21                          | Ethnic Israel not only heard—they should have understood that God would (1) use the Gentiles to provoke them to jealousy and (2) include the Gentiles despite their disobedience after reaching out to Israel. |
| 10:20–21 | Isa. 65:1–2                          |  |
| 11:2     | 1 Sam. 12:22; Ps. 94:14              | God has not rejected ethnic Israel (whom he foreknew).   |
| 11:3–4   | 1 Kings 19:10, 14, 18                | Though ethnic Israel's condition may seem hopeless, the faithful God is preserving and will preserve a remnant.  |
| 11:8–10  | Deut. 29:4; Isa. 29:10; Ps. 69:22–23 | Ethnic Israel's rejection is partial—not total—because there is a remnant, the elect. God hardened the rest.   |
| 11:26–27 | Isa. 59:20–21; 27:9                  | “In this way all Israel will be saved.”  |
| 11:34    | Isa. 40:13                           | God is incomprehensible and without counselors, so finite humans cannot understand his infinite ways or counsel him.   |
| 11:35    | Job 41:11a                           | God is without creditors, so finite humans cannot place God in their debt.   |

## ***2. Paul's Extended Metaphor of the Olive Tree in Romans 11:16b–24***

Paul's metaphor teaches there is one people of God. God's people under both the old and new covenants—both Israelites and Gentiles—are part of the *same* tree rooted in the soil of God's redemptive work.

A metaphor is an implied comparison without “like” or “as.” For example, “All flesh is grass” (Isa. 40:6). A metaphor has three parts: (1) the image; (2) the topic or item that the image illustrates; and (3) the point of similarity or comparison. Sometimes one or two of the three components may be implicit rather than explicit, as is the case with Romans 11:16b–24. Figure 2 shows how I understand that extended metaphor.<sup>11</sup>

11. Figure 2 is from Naselli, *From Typology to Doxology*, 20–21 (used with permission).

Fig 2. Extended Metaphor of the Olive Tree in Romans 11:16b–24

| 1. Image   | 2. Topic   | 3. Point of Similarity                       |
|--|--|--|
| a. One cultivated olive tree                                 | The people of God  | A living organism                            |
| b. Arboriculturist   | God  | Skillful cultivation                         |
| c. The root of the olive tree                                | Israel's patriarchs as recipients and conveyors of God's covenantal promises | Basic means of support and nourishment       |
| d. Natural branches  | Israelites   | Natural extension of the living organism     |
| e. Natural branches broken off                               | Non-Christian Israelites   | Disconnected from the living organism        |
| f. Wild olive shoot from an uncultivated olive tree          | Gentiles   | Not naturally related to the living organism |
| g. Wild olive shoot engrafted into the cultivated olive tree | Gentile Christians   | Attached extension of the living organism    |

#### 4. Three Views on Romans 9–11

The “Conclusion” to this book by my coeditor, Jared Compton, summarizes the book’s three main views in more detail, so what follows merely introduces those views (see Fig. 3).

Figure 3. Three Views on Romans 9–11

| Advocates           | Will there be a future mass-conversion of ethnic Israelites? <sup>13</sup> | Does Israel play a typological role in biblical theology? <sup>14</sup> |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Vlach               | Yes  | No  |
| Zaspel and Hamilton | Yes  | Yes   |
| Merkle              | No   | Yes   |

12. That is, when Christ returns, God will save a significant number of the ethnic Israelites alive at that time.

13. That is, in Romans 9–11 does Christ (the antitype) fulfill Israel (the type) by repeating Israel’s situation at a deeper, climactic level in salvation history?

### ***1. A Non-Typological Future-Mass-Conversion View***

Michael Vlach argues that Romans 9–11 promises a future salvation and role for national Israel. Israel, therefore, plays a non-typological role in biblical theology.

### ***2. A Typological Future-Mass-Conversion View***

Fred Zaspel and Jim Hamilton argue that Romans 9–11 promises a future salvation but not role for ethnic Israel. Israel, therefore, plays a typological role in biblical theology, even while maintaining a “special” status.

### ***3. A Typological Non-Future-Mass-Conversion View***

Ben Merkle argues that Romans 9–11 does not promise a future salvation or role for ethnic Israel. Israel, therefore, plays a typological role in biblical theology.

A fourth view is so similar to Merkle’s view that we do not include it as a separate view in this book, since the overlap would be so great and because it is a minority view. Some argue essentially what Merkle does but with one significant exception: “Israel” refers not to ethnic Israel but to spiritual Israel, namely, the entire church—both Jewish and Gentile Christians.<sup>14</sup> Some of this book’s contributors think Israel can refer to both Jewish and Gentile Christians in other literary contexts (e.g., Gal. 6:16), but they all agree that in Romans 9–11 Israel refers to ethnic Israelites.

Now as you read the rest of this book, may God’s Spirit illumine your mind to understand what Paul meant in Romans 9–11 and to rightly connect that with the rest of the Bible. And after you climb the perilous mountain of Romans 9–11, be sure to exult in our glorious God when you take in the panoramic view from Romans 11:33–36.

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14. Cf. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, ed. and trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947), 437; Wright, “Romans,” 10:687–93; Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 2 vols., Christian Origins and the Question of God 4 (London: SPCK, 2013), 2:1231–52.