

The Irrevocable Gifts of God

For most Jews, Saint Paul was a renegade Jew remembered with bitterness for the criticism he aimed at the Jewish religion after he became an ardent follower of Jesus of Nazareth. Perhaps it is time for this negative view of Paul to be balanced by the solid defence of the Jewish people that he wrote in the mid 50's of the first century C.E., in a letter to the Roman church. Scholars estimate that the main purpose of this letter was to encourage Christian-Jewish coexistence and to prevent Roman Christians from supporting the anti-Jewish sentiment prevailing in Rome at that time. Its compelling defence of the Jews was the most important scriptural backing for the turnaround of Catholic attitudes to the Jews in the Second Vatican Council. One can speculate that if Paul's defence of the Jews had been properly understood and obeyed from the start, then contempt for the Jews may never have taken root in the Church.

In this letter to the Roman Christians, there is one statement that deserves special attention at the present time, just as the whole world is criminalizing, not to say demonizing, the Jewish inhabitants of Judaea and Samaria and demanding they remove themselves from those lands. Much of this 'anti-settler' resentment is, in fact, derived from Christian institutions and churches, whose attitude to Jews should be, but clearly is not, informed by Paul's letter to the Romans. Over the last few years, strong condemnations have issued from the World Council of Churches, Presbyterian Church (USA), Disciples and United Church of Christ, Mennonite Central Committee, Sabeel, and Kairos Palestine, to mention a few. Most recently the United Methodist Church has resorted to punishing the Jews of Judaea and Samaria with a boycott. Not only do these mainstream Christians condemn and criminalize Jews for living in their ancient homeland, but they also influence leading statesmen, politicians and non-governmental organizations to do the same and worse.

Quite apart from the usual legal, socio-religious and historical arguments supporting Jewish settlement in Judaea and Samaria, these Christians should be challenged for being at odds with St. Paul over this issue. For in his letter to the Christian Romans, Paul says of the Jews: "*In respect to the gospel, they are enemies on your account; but in respect to election, they are beloved because of the patriarchs. For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable*" (Rom 11,28-29). In the context of Israel's election through the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Paul affirms that 'the gifts and call' are irrevocable. And in this reference to 'the gifts and call' divinely granted to the physical descendents of the patriarchs, no one can deny that the free gift of 'the Land' is among the most prominent of the gifts. There is no question here of Christian abrogation, replacement or supersessionism, for St. Paul confirms that the gifts, including the gift of the Land, are irrevocable. For all believing Christians this should be self-evident, but apparently it is not.

This brings us to the enduring incomprehension of this passage down the centuries. In a study of the history of its interpretation, Prof. Joseph Sievers summarizes, in the following way, a series of ecclesiastical misunderstandings going back for nearly two thousand years: "We have observed that Ambrosiaster's misinterpretation of Rom 11:29, based on a simple error or on a somewhat forced theology of baptism, exerted its influence for over one thousand years, even beyond the time of the Protestant Reformation. Erasmus and others corrected this error on the basis of exegetical considerations. Similarly, Augustine's teaching on grace and predestination which made extensive use of our verse has had an enduring influence on Catholic and Protestant theology, yet modern exegesis has shown that Paul's main concern here is not predestination. On the other hand Karl Barth's theological

approach, which grew out of his practical experience, has helped to frame the question of the meaning of Rom 11:29 in a new way, also for exegetes. Finally, important impulses for further exegetical and theological reflection have come through the teachings of Vatican II and of Pope John Paul II” (‘A History of the Interpretation of Romans 11:29’, in *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 14/2 [1997], 381-442, quote from 442).

It is almost unbelievable that such a small and apparently simple verse should have to wait until the middle of the twentieth century to start to make sense to faithful Christians. Prof. Sievers ascribes this delay to the strong Christian prejudice against the Jews, which persisted more or less unchallenged until the Nazi *Shoah*: “The verse, perhaps the most concise statement of God’s fidelity, has long been neglected or caused difficulties. For based on a Christian reading of other biblical texts it seemed inconceivable that Jews who did not accept Jesus as the Christ could still be in a positive relationship with God. Thus it was frequently argued that God’s gifts and call had either passed entirely to the Christian Church or had been put on hold until the Jews’ conversion... Only under the impact of the onslaught of antisemitism in this century were eyes of Christian theologians, writers, exegetes and church leaders opened to the possibility that our text, in the context of Rom (9-) 11... might provide a hermeneutical key to better understand the Jewish people’s relations with God and the Church” (op. cit. 440-1).

In the wake of the *Shoah*, Christian communities of all denominations have cited this verse again and again in their radical reassessment of Jews and in their attempts to foster greater understanding and tolerance of them. In the Catholic Church, in particular, it is one of the most frequently cited passages in the documents dealing with Catholic-Jewish relations. With little doubt, it has been one of the main impulses towards the acknowledgment of the continuing theological significance of Judaism and the Jewish people, and towards the abandonment of supersessionist attitudes.

However, confronted with current Christian attitudes towards the Jewish inhabitants of Judaea and Samaria, one wonders whether the full significance of this verse has even yet been grasped, and, more seriously, whether persistent anti-Semitism in some circles is still preventing its comprehension.

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