

c) *God's Freedom Defended Against Human Complaint* (9:19-21)

19. You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who resists his will?" 20. But (I say) who are you, mere human being, to answer back to God? Does something that has been made say to its maker, "Why have you made me thus?" 21. Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?

INTERPRETATION

The elective pattern shown in Moses (9:14-16). The strong emphasis Paul has placed upon the purely elective mode of God's working—that God "loves" and "hates" completely independently of any human conditioning—understandably raises the objection (v 14) that this projects upon God a way of proceeding that is unfair. Rather than representing a difficulty posed by a real dialogue partner, the objection, in diatribe mode, serves to spur the argument on to its next stage, where Paul continues his scriptural justification of God's total freedom of action. Moving on to the generation of the Exodus (vv 15-18), he sets the two key figures in the drama, Moses and Pharaoh, in contrastive parallel illustrating two opposite poles of God's free operation. Both were addressed by God, and in each case—positively in the one, negatively in the other—that address constituted an unequivocal divine assertion of freedom to act without any regard to human deserts.

In the case of Moses (v 15), it is a matter of mercy: Paul cites the final part of Exod 33:19 as a statement of the divine intent to exercise mercy in an entirely free way—the force of which comes out in the repeated "whomsoever . . . whomsoever." From this a first conclusion emerges (v 16)—similar to that derived from the divine choice of Jacob over Esau (vv 10-13): the exercise of God's mercy is not dependent upon any amount of "willing" (*thelontos*) or "achieving" (*trechontos*) on the human side; it depends totally upon God, as one who exercises mercy (*tou eleōntos theou*). It is ironical (and perhaps not unintentionally so on Paul's part) to portray Moses—the one who might reasonably be considered representative *par excellence* of righteousness through works of law—as the symbol of God's design to exercise mercy independently of all human achievement.

The elective pattern shown in Pharaoh (9:17-18). Pharaoh represents a similar exercise of divine freedom but one that goes in a completely different direction. Paul cites (v 17) the divine message to Pharaoh (Exod 9:16) in a form that suggests that the entire purpose of the Egyptian king's

appearance on the stage of history was simply to serve to display God's power and to make known his name throughout the earth. Implicit is the motif of God's "hardening" (*sklērynein*) of Pharaoh's heart (Exod 4:21; 7:3; 9:12; 14:4, 8, 17), which corresponds, negatively, to the exercise of mercy with respect to Moses (cf. v 18). Pharaoh's heart is not hardened because of antecedent evil dispositions on his part—to posit such would destroy the point Paul is making. The "hardened" Pharaoh became an instrument of a wider purpose—the achievement of worldwide "glory" for God's name through the miracle of the Exodus liberation.

Later (11:7, 25) Paul will speak of a "hardening" (*pōrōsis, epōrōthēsan*) in connection with that part of Israel that has not come to faith in Jesus as the Christ. It would be premature to see in the "hardened" Pharaoh of the present context an explicit symbol of this unbelieving Israel. Nonetheless, Paul is preparing the ground for the solution he will finally give, when the principle of divine freedom has been sufficiently established. In Pharaoh, scripture has shown God's sovereign freedom to "harden," as well as to exercise mercy (v 18). But it has also shown that a "hardening" brought about by God can serve a wider, salvific purpose. This leaves open the possibility for interpreting the present failure of Israel with respect to the gospel as a similar instance of divine action—the implication being that it too might also contain the seeds of an ultimately salvific, positive purpose, the proclamation of God's name in all the earth, that is, throughout the Gentile world (cf. 11:11-15, 30-32).

God's freedom defended against human complaint (vv 19-21). The scriptural argument centered upon Moses and Pharaoh (vv 15-18) has hardly met the earlier charge that God is unfair (v 14); Paul has simply driven more deeply into the assertion of God's freedom. He now (v 19) restates the objection in a somewhat more specific form (more precisely, he places it himself upon the lips of his reader: "You will say . . ."). The divine mode of acting illustrated in the two cases just cited—especially the "hardening" of Pharaoh—so appears to eliminate human freedom and responsibility that it is unreasonable for God to find fault with human beings for their obstinacy.

Taking up the objection in this form, Paul does not, as in the three earlier sections, turn to a specific biblical episode or divine announcement. Instead, in diatribe style, he first of all sharply reminds (v 20a) the objector of creaturely status ("mere human being") over against God and then introduces (vv 20b-21) a stock biblical image designed to exclude the very thought of human protest against the Creator's sovereign freedom. The image derived from the potter's freedom to shape vessels to any use at will creates difficulty for the modern reader but would hardly come as a surprise to an audience steeped in the biblical tradition (see Note). The force of the image as Paul employs it (cf. also Jer 18:1-11; Sir 33:13) stems

from the fact that the potter has to make vessels for a wide variety of uses, some noble (the banquet cup), some homely (the chamber pot); he will turn the same lump of clay in either direction as he sees fit. Like the potter, the Creator has a perfect right to turn the creature in whatsoever direction he chooses; like the clay, the human creature has no right to complain about being made for one use (an ignoble one) and not another ("Why have you made me thus?" v 20b).

Again, it has to be said that this hardly answers the difficulty posed, which concerned God's "blaming" in a context where human responsibility had been suppressed. Moreover, human beings are not simply lifeless, passive clay. To this Paul would probably respond that he has not in fact been speaking of God's blaming at all. The objection in a sense side-tracks the main issue and Paul more or less brushes it aside. The image is brought forward simply to illustrate and evoke a basic biblical dogma—one emerging above all from the Book of Job—that, in the end, the Creator as Creator has the right to proceed in a way totally unaccountable to human beings. This is the sole point being made. It is quite misguided to press out of the homely image more wide-ranging theological conclusions (as in the long-standing debate over "Predestination"; see Note on 9:18). We have here neither Paul's first nor his last word on the nature and operation of God.

NOTES

14. *What shall we say then?*: On Paul's use of the phrase *ti oun eroumen*, see Note on 4:1 above.
Is there injustice on God's part?: While it can have a more general usage, the word *adikia* in Romans is especially used as the negative correlative of *dikaiosynē* ("righteousness"); see esp. 3:5; 6:13; cf. also 1:18. As in 3:5 (*adikos*), the objection seems to suggest that God is acting contrary to what is right or just in an absolute sense.
15. *For he says to Moses, "I will have mercy on whomsoever I have mercy, and I will show pity to whomsoever I show pity."*: The quotation agrees exactly with LXX Exod 33:19.
16. *So then it is not a matter of human willing or achieving but of God exercising mercy*: The highly contracted formulation in the Greek requires that an introductory phrase, "it is not a matter of," be supplied. It is surprising that the word *anthrōpou* ("human beings") does not occur after the first two participles (*thelontos* . . . *trechontos*) since Paul clearly intends a contrast between human willing and achievement, on the one hand, and God's willing and having mercy (*eleōntos*), on the other (cf. the use of *thelein* with respect to God in v 18 and v 22). The Greek word translated "achieving" (*trechontos*) literally means "running"—a more intense expression of the biblical idea of "walking" used

with respect to human behavior in God's sight; see Note on 6:4. Later, Paul will point to the divine mercy as the principle upon which God's salvation will *universally* operate (11:30-32; 15:9; cf. also 9:23).

17. *For the scripture says to Pharaoh*: Strictly speaking according to the account of Exodus 9, the text (Exodus 9:16) introduced by this phrase represents the divine message given to Moses to pass on to Pharaoh. Paul knows that God did not speak directly to Pharaoh, so he presents Pharaoh as addressed by scripture, which for Paul always represents a statement of the divine intent.
"For this very purpose . . .": This opening phrase of Exod 9:16 as quoted by Paul (*eis auto touto exēgeira se*) stands much closer to the original Hebrew rather than to the LXX (*heneken toutou dietērēthēs*); the effect is to place greater stress upon the precise intention of God.
18. *So then he has mercy upon whomsoever he wills, and he hardens the heart of whomsoever he wills*: This statement, together with other elements of the surrounding context—notably the "Jacob-Esau" contrast in vv 10-13, the "Pot" illustration in vv 20b-21 and the phrase "vessels of wrath, ripe for destruction" in v 22—have been the chief scriptural source for the Augustinian doctrine of "Double Predestination," taken up at the time of the Reformation especially by John Calvin (see esp. the Excursus on the topic in Kuss 2.828-95). Without going into the matter at length, the following points may be made: 1. The doctrine in question wrongly applies the verse to the eternal (eschatological) salvation/damnation of individuals, whereas Paul is positing God's historical dealing with two figures, Moses and Pharaoh as an illustration of the sovereignly free operation of God's plan in history, not with respect to individuals, but to communities (Jews, Gentiles). 2. If Pharaoh's "hardening" in some sense anticipates the *pōrōsis* that in Paul's eyes has come upon Israel and Paul regards the latter condition as temporary (11:25-26), this suggests that neither is Pharaoh's *sklērynein* permanent. 3. A total theological system cannot be erected on the basis of Rom 9:10-23, since this is only a stage in Paul's total argument, one where theological statements are provisional, one-sided and incomplete. The objection in v 19 represents essentially an admission on Paul's part that he is, for the sake of his present argument, neglecting the element of human freedom and responsibility, upon which he can elsewhere (cf. 6:1-8:13; 2 Cor 5:5) be so insistent.
19. *You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault?"*: Paul's use of the diatribe style is prominent here; cf. Jas 4:12; Epictetus *Discourses* 1.18.9-10. The objection is similar in form to that in 3:7, though the grounds are somewhat different.
For who resists his will?: The point is that no one in fact resists God's will and hence the complaint in the first question is justified. The formulation is reminiscent of Job 9:19 (LXX: *tis oun krimati autou antistēsetai*), which is repeated in Wis 12:12.
20. *But (I say) who are you, mere human being, to answer back to God?*: The question is strongly reminiscent of God's response to the anguished questioning of Job: cf. 38:2-3; 40:1-2.

Does something that has been made say to its maker, "Why have you made me thus?": The introduction to the question agrees exactly with the central part of LXX Isa 29:16; the question itself appears to be (more loosely) based upon the parallel text in Isa 45:9; cf. also Wis 12:12.

21. *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for beauty and another for menial use?*: For the "potter/clay" image in the biblical tradition, cf. Ps 2:9; Job 10:8-9; Isa 29:16; 41:25; 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:1-12; Sir 33:13. The description of the potter's work in Wis 15:7 offers a remarkably close parallel to Paul's use of the image here: along with similarity of language (*kerameus, plassein, skeuos*), both feature the motif of the potter producing from the same clay (Wisdom: *ek tou autou pēlou*; Paul: *tou pēlou ek tou autou phramatos*) pots for both noble and less noble ends according to his will. The use made of the image is very different, however, Wisdom relating it to the pagan manufacture of idols. The sense of a human being as something moulded by God out of "clay" is pervasive in the psalm literature from Qumran to express both the sense of creaturely "distance" from the Creator and the wonder of the divine grace and condescension: 1QS 11:22; 1QH 1:21; 3:20-21, 23-24; 4:29; 11:3; 12:26, 32; 18:12.

FOR REFERENCE AND FURTHER STUDY

(See list following commentary on 9:22-29)

d) *The Elective Pattern Shown in the Composition of the Believing Community (9:22-29)*

22. What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, endured with much patience vessels of wrath ripe for destruction, 23. and in order to make known the riches of his glory for the vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory. . . . (Well, is not that his right?). 24.—us, that is, whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?
25. As indeed he says in Hosea,
"Those who were not my people I will call 'my people,'
and her who was not beloved I will call 'my beloved.'"
26. "And in the very place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' they will be called 'sons (and daughters) of the living God.'"
27. And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel:
"Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, only a remnant of them will be saved; 28. for it is by completing and curtailing that the Lord will carry out his word upon the earth."

29. And as Isaiah predicted, "If the Lord of hosts had not left us descendants, we would have become as Sodom and been made like Gomorrah."

INTERPRETATION

Introduction. The argument up to this point has shown how God gave sufficient indication in scripture that the divine way of proceeding would be sovereignly free, completely unconditioned by human response or deserts. It is now time to see how the present situation with respect to the constitution of the eschatological people of God—Gentiles included; Jews (save for a "remnant") excluded—responds to that view of the divine way of proceeding. If there is indeed a correspondence, then it cannot be said that "God's word has fallen through" (v 6a).

Paul, it must be said, could have gone about showing this correspondence rather more clearly. Vv 22-23 make up the protasis of a long conditional sentence for which the apodosis is lacking. In place of the apodosis, Paul begins, in v 24, a relative clause which describes God's "calling" into being of the eschatological people of God, made up of Gentiles and the Jewish-Christian remnant, as foretold in the scriptures (vv 25-29). The opening conditional clause (vv 22-23) states what God has done, the apodosis that the reader has to supply is a rhetorical question, expecting an affirmative answer ("Well, is not that his [God's] right?"), arising out of the preceding establishment from scripture of God's total freedom of action (vv 10-21). The logical transition between v 23 and v 24 only really makes sense when such a question is supplied. Vv 24-29 then explain that, in creating a "mixed" eschatological people, God has done what he had a total right to do and had in fact announced (through scripture) that this is what he would do. So the creation of such a community, heir to the privileges of Israel (vv 4-5), does not mean that God has been untrue to his "word" (v 6a).

"*Vessels of wrath*" (v 22). Paul, in fact, "homes in" on the present situation very gradually, like an aircraft pilot beginning a descent upon a small landing strip still a long way off. The "descent" comes in the long conditional sentence in vv 22-23, which is all concerned with the intention of God (cf. *thelōn* . . . , v 22; *kai hina* . . . , v 23). In the long scriptural proof (vv 14-21) Paul had defended God's right to deal positively and negatively with human beings as he saw fit. So now he frames the divine intention which has given rise to the present situation in terms of the same duality and uses language which consciously recalls the key scriptural examples (Moses [v 15], Pharaoh [v 17]) and the "potter/vessel" image (vv 20b-21). Paul speaks of God's (negative) intentions with respect to "*vessels (skeuē)* of wrath," on the one hand (v 22), and (positive) intentions with respect to "*vessels of mercy*," on the other (v 23).