The kingdom, Israel and the church

Paul=s thoughts on the relevance of God's promises to Israel (Romans 9-11)

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Abstract

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In Paul's eschatology the kingdom of God is concentrated in Jesus Christ. In and through Him the kingdom has come and will come. Does this, however, imply that the old covenantal tradition has come to an end? If being in Christ is decisive for belonging to the eschatological kingdom of God, what then is the enduring relevance of the promises of God to his covenantal people, Israel?

Romans 9-11 deals with these questions. Many scholars explain Romans 9-11 as an attempt to combine these two conflicting religious concepts, namely, on the one hand, the old covenantal tradition and on the other, the new eschatological soteriology, in which belonging to Christ is decisive.

According to this viewpoint, different soteriologies clash in these chapters. Romans 11 represents the old covenantal tradition. Romans 9 cannot be compromised with this as a predestinational soteriology. In Romans 10 faith in Christ is decisive – faith which implies personal responsibility. Is it true that Romans 9-11 clearly demonstrates, as many scholars assert, that in Paul's conception there cannot be a unanimous answer to these questions about belonging to the kingdom of God?

In this article it is attempted to indicate that there is in fact more unity in Romans 9-11 than is frequently assumed. This unity can be demonstrated by especially paying attention to the background of the citations that Paul quotes from the Old Testament.

The context of these citations shows, that when God acts, man can never be an outsider. Finally, the main issue is not about different soteriologies as static entities. Humankind is (getting) involved in God's ongoing plan, just as believers and unbelievers formed part of His plan in the past. In his Word God has revealed the purpose of that plan: His way of including the full number of Israel and gentiles into his kingdom.

1. Introduction

Who belongs to the eschatological kingdom of God? In Jewish thought different answers are given to this question. Generally speaking, a tendency in Jewish thought emphasises that it is sufficient to be a member of the people of God's covenant, in which case God's pre-destinate choice and acting are decisive. In this regard a well-known quotation from the Misjna can be used as illustration: "kol Israel yesj lahem cheleq le'olam habba", meaning that "the entire people of Israel will be part of the future world" (Sanhedrin X,1).

Another tendency, however, emphasises retaliation and therefore man's responsibility and implies that e.g. he who breaks Abraham's covenant and he who betrays his fellow man, cannot be part of the future world (Ab. III, 12).

In this article the question of how both tendencies are combined in Jewish thought will not be treated in depth, as views on these matters differ (Avemarie, 1999).

For the issue on which I would like to exchange ideas the above-mentioned will be used as a setting, especially in the eschatology as Paul speaks about it. Paul explains that in Christ and because of Jesus Christ the *olam habba* (the future world) has become a reality. He who has accepted Jesus Christ, is born again in a new creation. This view point implies that being in Christ is decisive to be part of the eschato-logical kingdom of God.

Simultaneously, and according to Paul's reasoning, this does not imply that God has put an end to the promises he made to his people, the people of Israel. The gifts and the call of God are indeed irrevocable.

2. Different soteriological concepts?

Romans 9-11 especially deals with the above-mentioned issues. Many scholars consider these chapters from Romans as a struggle in which it becomes clear that these different soteriological concepts are not compatible. As an example I mention the analysis of Räisänen (1987).

He states that in this part of the Bible three different soteriologies clash (1987:2930, 2933). In Romans 10 the new soteriology comes into focus – a soteriology in which being in Christ is decisive. Everyone is responsible in this regard, as belief or unbelief in Christ ultimately is the choice we will be faced with. Apart from this viewpoint, the core of the old covenant theology can be found in Romans 11 – according to Räisänen this core thought implies that the entire people of Israel is saved due to God's faithfulness to his promises. Thus, according to Räisänen, hardheartedness and unbelief can only be temporary. In Romans 9 Paul tries to connect both thoughts by means of the concept of predestination. Finally Paul, however, does not succeed in uniting the different ways in which man can be part of the eschatological kingdom.

Many people speak of an unresolved *aporia* in Paul's thinking (e.g. Hübner, 1984:122; Mayer (1974:313) calls it a "Paradoxon"). Others believe that Paul had not yet been acquainted with the revelation given to him in Chapter 11, when he started writing. However, in this line of thought, the exegesis of Romans 11 removes the sharpness of Romans 9. Hofius (1986:306) states e.g. that "dass Gottes erwählendes und verwerfendes Handeln in Isr *umschlossen* ist von einer Erwählung *ganz* Isrs", while Lyonnet (1989:266) calls the reprobation of Israel only "partiel et provisoire". In my opinion these views break down the unity in Paul's reasoning in Romans 9-11. Are there really different answers to the question how man can participate in the kingdom of God? If so, is the implication in one chapter that it is God's predestination which is decisive, but in the next chapter man's responsibility, and finally God's covenantal loyalty?

I will try to demonstrate that more unity can be found in the three chapters than generally is assumed, particular by paying more attention to the citations from the Old Testament than is usually done.

In Romans 9-11, Paul asks the question which causes unceasing anguish in his heart (9:2). How is it possible that his own people, the Israelite people with whom God started his work and to whom God gave such wonderful promises, are secluding themselves for the greater part from God's kingdom as it was realised in his Son?

What is the lasting value of God's Word? Even one step further, behind the issue of the reliability of the spoken Word of God, is the issue of the reliability of the speaking God himself. It must be noted that Paul, especially in the chapters where he deals with these essential questions, quotes God's spoken word from the Old Testament more than anywhere else in his writing. The text citations from the Old Testament are not only

intended to strengthen his argument but they form an essential part in the chain of thoughts.

It struck me, that in studying the texts which Paul quotes in these chapters more closely, more unity is revealed in Paul's argument. Especially when one looks at the texts which Paul refers to in their Old Testament context, it becomes clear that there is more to these texts than it appears at first sight.

When the background of these citations and allusions is taken into account, it becomes clear that there is a reasonable unity regarding the questions about the way God fulfils his promises and therefore about the question how man can participate in salvation.

Due to length restrictions it is impossible to explain every verse of the three chapters in this article. I, however, would like to give some prominent examples, showing how the previous questions can be made more comprehensible.

3. Chapter 9 – God's mercy and man's responsibility

In this chapter Paul develops a first answer to the question of God's reliability. The answer is short and dual. At first Paul says that it has always been like this: God's word does not automatically apply to all the descendants of God's covenantal people. From the beginning God made distinctions. Salvation ultimately depends on God's call.

A second answer to the question of God's reliability deals with the counter question, which refers to the first answer. Does this not point to unfairness from God? The answer to this is illustrated by the image of the potter. This image makes it clear that creation cannot call its creator to the stand.

Finally God's calling is an expression of mercy, which means God does not use any contribution on man's part to effect his salvation. Salvation is thus also a *creatio ex nihilo*, a creation of God, who turns to his creation in full mercy.

God does not find any merit in man. The citations from the Old Testament clearly show that God's call had already been present long before man could deserve any merit. That means that, after the coming of Jesus Christ, this fact that man has no merit is not something new. The texts which are quoted from the Old Testament indicate that it has always been like this: God's promises to Isaac and Jacob were made though they had not yet been born and had done nothing either good or bad.

Right from the beginning this meant that Ishmael and Esau were not called. This situation is most clearly stated in the case of the Pharaoh of Egypt. To make his point, Paul even focuses the text on the Pharaoh (Rom. 9:17). Exodus 9 states that God, in His patience, allows the Pharaoh to continue his reign, so that it would become clear how He Himself would deliver his people. In this way, God's power towards the Pharaoh would be shown to the surrounding people. Paul even goes one step further by stating that God "raised up" the Pharaoh for his own purpose (comp. Ex. 9:16 *hè'èmadtikha*, "I kept you alive" with Romans 9:17 *exègeira se*, "I raised you up", i.e. for the very purpose of showing my power). This thought has the implication that God does not tolerate man only in patience, but purposefully utilises him in the unfolding of His plan. The question can, however, be asked whether this nuance of meaning does not indicate arbitrariness, especially if one keeps the following in mind: "He gives mercy to whom he wants to and he hardens whom he wants to" (9:18). Is this idea not quite different from Paul's speaking about the people's own responsibility when they refuse to accept God's calling? At first glance this seems quite different. However, I do not see an inconsistency or an apory in this.

The aim of Paul's words in Romans 9 is to emphasise the exclusion of human merits. God who is the Creator and the Deliverer sets his own plan. No achievement or default of man is decisive; receiving salvation is a matter of pure mercy. What Paul says about justification is validated in history. The motivation of God's acting lies in his mercy which is totally undeserved.

However, if one reads the Old Testament texts in their context, one will see that God's acting does not exclude man's responsibility. It struck me that Paul constantly quotes passages from Scripture in which the immediate textual context indicates that man is called to make a decision. The choice of quotations is not arbitrary.

Concerning the Pharaoh, Paul does not point to a text which explicitly mentions the hardening of his heart, which would have been very fitting within the framework of Paul's argument (verse 18). Why does Paul choose a citation from Exodus 9 in Romans 9:17 and not e.g. Exodus 7:3: "but I will harden Pharaoh's heart"? In Exodus 9 Moses reveals God's plan to the Pharaoh, but again he offers the possibility of a change in attitude to the Pharaoh and his people. In Exodus 9 it is said for the first time that some Egyptians fear the word of God and seek shelter for themselves and for their cattle. This is the immediate context of Paul's quotation. Paying attention to the word of God is decisive from man's point of view in Exodus 9:20, 21.

This emphasis on human responsibility is also found in the case of Ishmael, who makes fun of Isaac in Genesis 21 and with Esau, who, in the immediate context of the citation from Genesis 25, decides to put his need for food above God's blessing. Although this is not mentioned explicitly, the context of the quotations in Romans 9 indicates that the excluding of merits does not cancel man's responsibility – on the contrary!

A sound exegesis of Romans 9 should thus include cognisance of the Old Testament citations and their context. If one considers the context of the quoted Scripture parts, one will discover more unity in Paul's way of thinking than until now has generally been considered in exegesis.

4. Chapter 10: Man's responsibility

In chapter 10 Paul emphasises the responsibility of Israel in answering to God's calling. In fact, this is a second answer to the question about God's reliability and is the most simple answer. God can not be seen as unreliable when Israel refuses to catch hold of His out-stretched arms. With a citation from Joel 3, Paul stresses that everyone who calls upon the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:13). Why have the people of Israel not reached this point of urgent calling upon the name of God? With six citations, Paul illustrates that it is not God's fault: despite the fact that God sent prophets, messengers whose voices were clearly heard, the people of Israel remained disobedient. This should not be the case at the present time, because Jesus Christ has already come. Throughout history God and his people have been opposed on this matter. When this line of thought is noticed, the citations express Paul's argument in an excellent way.

However, there is also more to these citations when one looks at the context. The former citation from Joel 3 is part of a context in which Joel stresses that calling upon God's name is entirely the work of God's Spirit. When Paul focuses on man's responsibility this does not mean that everything is left in human hands. Beside the main tendency of responsibility an accompanying tendency stresses God's work. This aspect is actually stressed in all citations which are mentioned in chapter 10.

5. Chapter 11: Salvation for Israel and gentiles

Considering both sides of the issue a consistent answer is given to Paul's question about God's reliability. Yet, still another part of this issue follows in chapter 11.

In this third piece of text Paul brings together some lines of thought which until now have been mentioned, but not been made explicit. Romans 9 already touched upon the fact that not only Jews, but also gentiles are called by the Lord (verse 24). Chapter 10 states that the road to salvation is open for those who call on the name of God, without distinguishing between Jew or Greek (verse 12). In chapter 11 Paul explicitly deals with the relation between these groups.

At first he repeats the contents of chapter 9: God has not rejected his people – an aspect that has already been in focus. This given is now proven from Israel's history. Throughout history at least 7000 were strenghtened by the Lord. The context of the well-known quotation from 1 Kings 19 again indicate that God's predestination does not ignore human choices and perseverance. The main line of thought is similar to that in chapter 9: in the rest which is saved, God reaches his purpose for His entire people.

The question then arises why the major part of God's people became disobedient? Paul gives a reason for this in verses 11-24. Because of the fall of the major part of Israel, God directed His salvation to the gentiles: this should make Israel jealous and may result in the "whole" of Israel being saved.

The way in which Paul describes this mutual dependence in salvation between Israel and the other people cannot be treated in full in this article. I consider verses 25-27 as a summary of Paul's line of thought which is developed in chapter 11. In accordance with Ridderbos (1959: 261) and Versteeg (1991:162) I interpret the secret of which Paul is speaking here in a historical sense. This secret has now been revealed and particularly concerns the way in which the whole of Israel is saved. I consider the words "all Israel" in verse 26 and "all" in verse 32 as concepts which express a quality and not just a quantity.

In this way "all Israel" is saved, namely by means of the miraculous interdependence of God's way of dealing with Israel and with the other people as it is explained in chapter 11.

Once again the Old Testament citations indicate that God's acting is foregrounded. In this regard only one example illustrating this is the quotation from Isaiah 59:20. This verse emphasises that God himself takes care of his covenantal promise to become a reality. God will come as Saviour and will banish the ungodliness from Jacob. It is quite remarkable that Paul makes a considerable change in the text of Isaiah. As far as I know, this has not been explained by any commentator in relation to the context of Paul's line of thought. In the Hebrew text, however, it is

stated that the Saviour will come to Zion (MT *leTsion*, Q *'èl Tsion*) to actualise his covenant, and the Greek translation of the LXX also states: The Saviour will come for the sake of (*heneken*) Zion. Paul, however, writes that the Saviour will come from Zion (*ek Sion*). Usually this is brought in connection with the thought that God's salvation will originate in Zion, for instance Psalm 14. But why Paul deliberately changes this is not clear. In my opinion Paul deliberately reads the text of LXX "for the sake of Zion" with a small change of detail: because of Zion, the Saviour will come. This means that the Saviour will come from Zion (i.e. because of the ungodliness of Zion) for the gentiles and at the same time, by this arrival He will banish the ungodliness from Jacob. In this way the citation actually stresses the reciprocality of salvation – a line of thought Paul has just developed: from Israel towards the gentiles, because of the fall of Israel, and from the gentiles back to Israel, because the faith of the gentiles which activates the envy of Israel.

In the same way the context of Isaiah 59 connects God's work for Israel and for the gentiles. Because of the disobedience of Israel, enemies from the gentiles arrive. But when these enemies try to rule without considering God's power, God destroys them and will demand repayment. He will, however, show His salvation throughout the world until the far end of the earth. In this way God is loyal to the covenant with the ancestors, says Isaiah 59. This is exactly what Paul intends to indicate. What has been a secret up till now, is brought in the open in this way.

In verses 33-36 Paul ends with praise. Here we find a kind of test for every explanation of Romans 9-11. When it is not possible to end in praise about the untraceable ways of God, something has gone wrong along the way. The ultimate thing man can do is to praise God and acknowledge His wisdom, which is beyond our comprehension.

6. Conclusion

In my opinion it could be a worthwhile approach of the text of Romans 9-11 to take into account the context of the Old Testament citations when explaining these chapters. Up till now this approach has not been applied very often. The way in which Paul makes use of quotations forms a direct link with the main line of his argument. Simultaneously another tendency can be discerned in studying the context of the Old Testament quotations as this gives a special depth to Paul's line of thought.In this way the unity of Paul's argument also becomes more transparent.

- In 9:1-29 the main line of thought is God's merciful call which excludes any human merits. Another tendency, however, emerges

from the background of the citations: God's call does not cancel human responsibility.

- In 9:30-10:21 the main thought is: Israel is guilty because they refuse to listen. The idea of God's continuing work is, however, also maintained.

- In chapter 11 the main line of thought is again God's unconditional acting. Emerging from the context of the citations the thought that God's acting does not exclude human responsibility is, however, also developed – although in the background. Moreover, this chapter presents a special focus on the interdependence of Israel and the gentiles in God's plan of salvation.

7. Theological unity

In Paul's argument a clear answer is given to the question: what is decisive for being part of God's chosen people and thus for receiving salvation? The answer is that salvation cannot be obtained by any human merit. Salvation is purely dependent on God's merciful acting.

This thought is stressed by quotations from the Old Testament as the continuing way of God's acting throughout history. Eventually this does not turn out to be a new soteriology after the coming of Jesus Christ. The same soteriology has already been present in the structure of the covenant in the Old Testament.

On the point of merits Paul is very clear. However, there is no systematic clarity on the question what human liberty and responsibility imply notwithstanding God's acting. We gain insight on this point when we take into account the context of the Old Testament citations. Then it becomes clear in which way God acts with people.

Things may become much clearer when viewed synoptically, so that participation in salvation or not can be seen truly as God's work. But when the believer finds himself in a certain situation, it becomes clear that personal responsibility is maintained.

The remarkable way in which Paul deals with these matters is that he enables the Word of God to speak for itself. In this way those who listen to Paul's preaching are involved in the same history of God's acting with man, by the same texts of the Old Testament and therefore by the spoken Word of God himself. It is not a matter of static quantities nor of different soteriologies which can synoptically be heaped together.

We are or we are getting involved in God's plan while God actually has spoken clearly in his Word about the purpose of His plan. Finally, these parts of Scripture deal with the way in which God completes and unites the salvation of the "whole" of Israel and the salvation of "all" the gentiles in the one and only people of God. That is how God establishes his kingdom.

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