

Romans 9 and the Calvinist Doctrine of Reprobation



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Calvinist theologian Wayne Grudem defines reprobation as “the sovereign decision of God before creation to pass over some persons, in sorrow *deciding not to save them*, and to punish them for their sins, and thereby to manifest his justice.”¹ The doctrine of reprobation, which is essential to Calvinism as the necessary corollary to the doctrine of unconditional election,² asserts that there is a certain group of persons who have never been and will never be the objects of God’s redeeming love regardless of whether or not they hear the gospel. God has determined not to give this certain group of individuals the grace and faith necessary for salvation. He does not base this determination to withhold grace and faith on anything having to do with the reprobate persons themselves. He withholds grace and faith from them simply because it brings him the most glory. The jolting but unavoidable reality is that Calvinism teaches that the one and only reason that the lost are not saved is that “God does not want them saved.”³ Indeed, Grudem’s definition is quite clear on this point: reprobation is God’s “sovereign decision . . . before creation . . . not to

¹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 685. Italics mine. Cf. W. S. Reid, “Reprobation,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984): “This term . . . refers to the fact that God has eternally condemned the nonelect to eternal punishment.” Similarly, Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 319, avers that reprobation refers “to negative predestination or God’s choice of some to suffer eternal damnation or lostness.”

²Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 684: “When we understand election as God’s sovereign choice of some persons to be saved, then there is *necessarily* another aspect of that choice, namely, God’s sovereign decision to pass over others and not to save them.” Italics mine. See also Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (1932; Woodstock, Ontario: Devoted, 2017), 47, available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=y3KUDgAAQBAJ&pg=PA47&lpg=PA47&dq=#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed January 17, 2018): “The doctrine of absolute Predestination of course logically holds that some are foreordained to death as truly as others are foreordained to life.” James Leo Garrett, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 2001), 2:483–85, demonstrates that Augustine, Calvin, and those following in their theological tradition would affirm that reprobation is a necessary implication of election.

³Ken Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty: A Molinist Approach* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2010), 58, calls this “the deep, dark, ‘dirty-little-secret’ of Calvinism.”

save them.”⁴ Critically engaging this particular doctrine of Calvinism is important because reprobation lies at the very core of Calvinist soteriology and because it suffers from acute exegetical, philosophical, and theological problems. If the dubious doctrine of reprobation falls, Calvinism will need a significant revision.

In calling reprobation into question, I will focus on the very particular task of *demonstrating that Romans 9 does not demand such a doctrine*. This may seem rather inconsequential at first glance, but it is actually quite significant because of the role Romans 9 plays in Calvinist constructions of the doctrine. Calvinists themselves acknowledge that reprobation is enormously problematic and that the problem is compounded by a lack of biblical support.⁵ Grudem notes, “. . . the doctrine of reprobation is the most difficult of all the teachings of Scripture for us to think about and accept because it deals with such horrible and eternal consequences for human beings made in the image of God.”⁶ The repugnance of reprobation is why Calvinists like Grudem come up with philosophically incoherent fixes like “single predestination,” God’s “asymmetrical relationship” to election and reprobation, God’s “two wills,” “two loves,” and so on.⁷ Grudem concedes that it seems disingenuous to speak of God’s sorrow over the reprobate if he decrees it. His answer is that “God can decree something that causes him sorrow yet ultimately will bring him glory.”⁸ But God’s decreeing something sorrowful is not the problem with reprobation. It is God’s decreeing something evil. Jerry Walls’s observation at this point is apt:

[T]heological compatibilists [like Grudem] often make claims and engage in rhetoric that naturally lead people to conclude that God loves them and desires their salvation in ways that are surely misleading to all but those trained in the subtleties of Reformed rhetoric. . . . Such language loses all meaning, not to mention all rhetorical force, when we remember that on compatibilist premises God could determine the impenitent to freely repent, but has chosen instead to determine things in such a way that they freely persist in their sins.⁹

⁴For the sake of simplicity and ease of engagement, I will be interacting in the body of the paper exclusively with Grudem’s view of reprobation. His systematic theology text has sold over a half-million copies and is a trusted staple of conservative evangelical seminary education. His construction of the doctrine conforms to the standard “infralapsarian” approach of the Reformed tradition. See also Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 316–17.

⁵Boettner, 47: [In his section on reprobation] “The chief difficulty with the doctrine of Election of course rises in regard to the unsaved; and the Scriptures have given us no extended explanation of their state.”

⁶Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 685.

⁷Roger Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 102–35, and Keathley, *Salvation and Sovereignty*, 138–63, demonstrate, in their respective chapters on unconditional election, the self-contradictory and, therefore, self-defeating nature of these assertions.

⁸Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 686.

⁹Jerry Walls, “Why No Classical Theist, Let Alone Orthodox Christian, Should Ever Be A Compatibilist,” *Philosophia Christi* 13 (2011): 98–99.

God's refusal to determine the repentance of sinners when it is within his power to do so can be called nothing other than immoral. Damning certain people by withholding something freely given to others is not glorious. It is indeed a horrible decree.¹⁰

Therefore, if there are no biblically explicit reasons to affirm reprobation, it should be gladly and quickly rejected. The burden is on Calvinist theologians to assemble significant and unassailable biblical support for reprobation because it runs against the grain of what the Bible clearly teaches about God's character and purposes,¹¹ and because it is philosophically impossible both to affirm reprobation and deny that God causes evil.¹² Calvinists must do more than point to biblical texts like Romans 9 that might suggest reprobation; they need unimpeachable proof of it. Therefore, it is not necessary to demonstrate that Romans 9 *cannot* affirm reprobation. All that is required is to demonstrate that Romans 9 can be understood legitimately another way.

Moreover, demonstrating that Romans 9 does not demand reprobation is significant because the main reason Calvinists give for affirming reprobation is that Scripture does demand it, that there is no other way to read such texts. Grudem says of reprobation, "It is something that we would not want to believe, and would not believe, unless Scripture taught it Moreover, if we are convinced that these verses [Rom 9:17–22, specifically] teach reprobation, then we are obligated both to believe it and accept it as fair and just of God, even though it causes us to tremble in horror as we think of it."¹³ But what if one is not convinced on exegetical grounds that these verses teach reprobation? Romans 9 most certainly can be read faithfully and seriously in a completely different way—indeed, in a manner much more faithful to Paul's intentions and to the plain sense of the text and context. Strong cases can be made that other Calvinist proof-texts for reprobation can be

¹⁰R. C. Sproul, *Chosen by God* in *The R. C. Sproul Collection*, vol. 1, available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=n9QRDgAAQBAJ&pg=PT244&lpg=PT244&dq=#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed January 20, 2018). Sproul's honesty at this point would be refreshing if his conclusions weren't so disturbing: "The nasty problem for the Calvinist [is] If God can and does choose to insure the salvation of some, why then does he not insure the salvation of all? . . . The only answer I can give to this question is that I don't know. . . . One thing I do know. If it pleases God to save some and not all, there is nothing wrong with that." On the contrary, it is the very definition of *wrong*.

¹¹The handful of texts that might suggest reprobation is set against those texts that clearly teach God's love for and desire to save all (John 3:16, 1 Tim 2:2–4, 2 Pet 3:9, 1 John 2:2, etc.).

¹²William Lane Craig, "Response to Paul Kjoss Helseth's 'God Causes All Things,'" in *Four Views on Divine Providence*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 58–62. Craig argues that, against the determinism on which reprobation is based, five objections can be raised: (1) "[It] cannot offer a coherent interpretation of Scripture," (2) "cannot be rationally affirmed," (3) "makes God the author of sin and denies human responsibility," (4) "nullifies human agency," and (5) "makes reality into a farce."

¹³Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 685. See also Reid, "Reprobation," who states that, while Calvin, in his *Institutes*, regarded the doctrine as dreadful, he viewed it as the clear teaching of Scripture, citing mainly Romans 9 as his evidence from the New Testament.

understood differently as well. Grudem relies heavily on Romans 9 (and Romans 11), but mentions Jude 4 and 1 Peter 2:8 as well, both verses highlighting the fact that the unfaithful were destined for condemnation long ago.¹⁴ However, there is every reason to understand these verses as simply pointing out the fact that God has always planned to condemn those who oppose the gospel. Again, if reprobation readings are not demanded by the texts, and reprobation is, frankly, a theological and philosophical cul-de-sac, then it should be abandoned.

So, to restate the purpose of this essay: *the problematic doctrine of reprobation is not a necessary theological implication of Romans 9*. If Romans 9 disappears as an iron-clad justification for reprobation, then the doctrine and Calvinism with it are in serious trouble.

Romans 9 and the Centrality of Jewish Unbelief

The essential exegetical warrant for the claim that Rom 9 does not support the doctrine of reprobation is this: Romans 9–11 is focused on *the salvation-historical role of unbelieving Jews in the present, not the ontological status of all unbelieving people for all time*. While Jewish rejection of the gospel certainly has implications for everyone else (i.e. Rom 9:22–26 and 11:17–25), Paul’s fundamental argument in Romans 9–11 addresses the problem that Jewish unbelief is creating for the credibility of the gospel he is preaching and the manner in which he goes about preaching it. What Paul says of these unbelieving Jews cannot simply be transferred to all unbelievers. In fact, the point that Paul is driving home in Romans 9–11 is that God does *not* treat Jews the same way that he treats the rest of humanity. The things Paul says in Romans 9–11 concerning the *unchosen, hated, not recipients of mercy, hardened, vessels of wrath, not saved, like Sodom and Gomorrah, pursuing salvation by works, unbelieving, stumbling, zealous without knowledge, disobedient, obstinate, failing to obtain what they are seeking, in a stupor, blind, bent, trespassing, broken off, not spared, enemies of the gospel* are things he is saying about unbelieving Jews, not everybody else. If Calvinists want to try to infer that these adjectives apply eternally to all those individuals who will never believe in Jesus because God has foreordained it, that is certainly their prerogative, but it is not a demand of the text and such a theological assertion fits very poorly within the context of Romans and with the rest of the biblical witness.

This exegetical approach to Romans 9 begins with the conclusions of John Taylor, who writes:

Christian scholarship has focused on Romans 9 as source material for the free will/determinism debate, going back at least as far as Origen’s dispute with the Gnostics. With Augustine the ground of the debate moved, and after him a determinist reading of Romans 9 became dominant, continuing in Protestant churches through the writings of Luther and Calvin. Both this reading, with its emphasis on individual election as the thrust of the

¹⁴Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 685.

chapter, and the opposing reading, with its emphasis on free will and corporate election, stem largely from an atomistic and philosophical approach to the passage which has paid too little attention to the relevance of Rom 9–11 to the Roman believers to whom Paul writes, and to the flow of the argument in Romans. This is not to suggest that the concerns of the tradition are illegitimate, or that such questions should not be asked of the text. But it is necessary to question whether Romans 9 can bear the weight of the theology which has been thrust upon it, and to investigate what theological emphases would emerge from a more contextual and unified reading.

Based on an approach to Romans which sees the interpretation of the phenomenon of Jewish unbelief in Jesus by comparison to the growth of the church among the Gentiles as the *key factor behind the writing of the letter* (italics mine), an initial investigation leads to a number of conclusions.¹⁵

Taylor's conclusions are: (1) unbelieving Jews are the focus of Romans 9; (2) the fate of these Jews is salvation by faith, a fact that restores credibility to Paul's claim that his gospel is powerful enough to save both Gentiles and Jews; (3) God is free to save these Jews by faith, and, therefore, is not unjust to reject them if their hope remains in "works of the Law;" and (4) the Jewish hope for salvation is based completely on God's mercy. The significance of these conclusions for this discussion of reprobation is that Rom 9 is not dealing with philosophical issues related to the metaphysics of divine action and human freedom.¹⁶ Rather, it is the first part of Paul's answer to the central problem driving the entire letter: the problem that Jewish unbelief is creating for the credibility of his gospel and his missiology.¹⁷

The centrality of the problem of Jewish unbelief in Paul's letter is *implicit* in his proposition in Rom 1:16–17: the gospel is the power to save Jews and Gentiles in fulfillment of God's covenant faithfulness, yet there is a potential for shame. The problem is *explicitly* set forth in Rom 3:5, *Is God unrighteous in inflicting wrath upon Jews rather than saving them?* The problem is fully addressed in the letter's climax, Romans 9–11: Jews are rejecting the gospel and are, therefore, rejected by God. If God's righteousness is revealed in the power of the gospel to save Jews and Gentiles, then what of his righteousness if Jews are rejected?¹⁸ The whole promise of God in Messiah Jesus through his chosen people was to

¹⁵John Taylor, "The Freedom of God and the Hope of Israel: Theological Exegesis of Romans 9," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 56 (Fall 2013): 25–41.

¹⁶Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT, ed. Gordon Fee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 548: "Once we recognize the importance of this Jewish motif in Romans, we can give Rom. 9–11 its appropriate place in the letter. . . . Paul is not simply using Israel to illustrate a theological point, such as predestination or the righteousness of God. He is talking about Israel herself. . . ."

¹⁷Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 548: "Paul frames chaps. 9–11 with allusions to the key tension he is seeking to resolve: the Jews, recipients of so many privileges (9:4–5), are not experiencing the salvation offered in Christ (implied in 9:1–3)."

¹⁸Richard H. Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy: The Origin and Purpose of the Jealousy Motif in Romans 9–11*, WUNT 63 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1994), 51.

create a worldwide Jew and Gentile family, through whom he would rescue all of creation. On one hand, these promises are being fulfilled amazingly: Gentiles are coming to faith in droves. What is happening in the church in Rome is known all over the world (1:8). On the other hand, surprisingly, mysteriously, grievously, the Jews, by and large, are refusing to come. And this raises the question of God's righteousness. Has he been unable to keep his promises stretching all the way back to Abraham?¹⁹

Let's trace this concept quickly through the letter: The power of the gospel is on display in the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles (1:16–17). God has the right to judge and save both Jewish and Gentile sinners by his standards, and his standard is faith in the gospel (2:12–16). Gentiles who think their efforts will save them are in trouble (2:1–5). Gentiles who have something happen to their hearts will be viewed as righteous (2:14–16). Jews who think their efforts will save them are in trouble (2:17–24). Jews who have something happen to their hearts will be viewed as righteous (2:28–29). It is in the discussion of true Jewishness that Paul raises the issue of fairness, an issue he does not raise in the discussion of Gentiles. Is it fair for God to condemn Jews because of their failure to keep the Law God gave them. Is it fair of God to use their failure to point others to the way of faith (3:5–8)?²⁰ Paul's answer, at this point in the letter, to the question of God's righteousness with respect to Jewish unbelief is simply to affirm it because he is the judge of the world. Then he quickly returns to the central point of Romans 1–3: everyone is under the judgment of sin, therefore the promise to Abraham is unfulfilled. The Law has not solved the problem (3:9–20). So, apart from the Law, God has revealed his righteous commitment to keep his promise to Abraham: the salvation of a Jew and Gentile family through faith in Jesus (3:21–31). This is Abraham's faith and true members of Abraham's family share this faith (Rom 4). They are beloved children who now share in the whole story of Israel's redemption: rescued from Adam's death-dealing rebellion by the Second Adam (Rom 5), brought out from slavery to sin through the death of Christ (Rom 6), having the Law fulfilled in them through Christ (Rom 7), and brought fully through suffering to the end of the story by the Spirit (Rom 8).²¹

But the problem of God's righteousness in the face of Jewish unbelief left hanging in Rom 3:5–8 is made all the more acute by what has happened from 3:9 to the end of Romans 8. If God has accomplished his great work in Christ of adopting many sons through whom he will rescue all of creation, what has gone wrong with the Jews? They aren't coming. Isn't this an embarrassment? Isn't this a failure on God's part? Isn't this unjust treatment of his covenant people, which calls God's righteousness into question? Or is this simply evidence

¹⁹Taylor, "The Freedom of God and the Hope of Israel," 36.

²⁰The questions of 3:5–8 ("Does Jewish faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? Is God unrighteous to inflict wrath on unfaithful Jews?") are both answered with *mē genoito!* These questions are raised again in Rom 9:14 ("Is there any injustice in God?"), 11:1 ("Has God rejected his people?"), and 11:11 ("Have they stumbled in order to fall?"). The answer is the same: *mē genoito!*

²¹N. T. Wright, "Romans and the Theology of Paul," available at <http://ntwrightpage.com/2016/05/07/romans-and-the-theology-of-paul/> (accessed January 17, 2018): 5–20.

that God has given up on them in favor of the Gentiles? Should the church in Rome even bother with Jews anymore? Should Paul continue to go to the synagogue first as he takes his gospel west toward Spain? And so, in Romans 9–11, Paul takes up the task of explaining how Jewish rejection of the gospel is not a source of shame for him or a cause to question God’s righteousness. The essence of Paul’s defense of the gospel in the face of Jewish rejection is this:

God actually purposed Jewish rejection all along. Just as God’s rejection of the Jewish Messiah served to save the world, so his on-going rejection of Jews serves a salvific purpose as well.²² The present function of Jewish rejection of the gospel is to show the world how God does not save, piling up and bearing a bit longer the wrath deserved by the whole world and driving the good news of how he does save out into the world (Rom 9). The source of Jewish rejection is what it has always been, confidence in their privileges instead of trust in the promises, and the solution to their rejection is what it has always been, faith in God’s promised Messiah (Rom 10). And the story of unbelieving Jews is not over. Their fate is not consignment to perdition based on God’s inscrutable choice; instead, it is glorious salvation as part of God’s ultimate plan to have a Jew and Gentile family of faith, if they believe (Rom 11).

So, where did the Romans 9 reprobation readings of the last 1500 years come from? From this one fact: Paul’s overwhelming concern about Jewish rejection of the gospel has not been shared by those interpreting the text in subsequent generations. The unbelief of Jews as a primary falsifier of the gospel has not been a feature of Christian soteriological reflection in many centuries. When the central concern of Romans has been lost by those reading it, is it any wonder that confusion ensues? Is it any wonder that Paul’s interests have been replaced with those of Western metaphysics of divine action and human freedom? It turns out, however, that Romans 9–11 is not about the ontological function of reprobation in service of God’s justice, but the salvation-historical function of present Jewish unbelief in service of a great Jew and Gentile redemption.

Paul’s discourse on God’s dealings with unbelieving Jews not only excludes reprobation readings in Romans 9 because he is not addressing God’s soteriological disposition to all people, it also excludes reprobation because what is said of unbelieving Jews is temporary, not permanent.²³ Again, Grudem’s definition of reprobation states that God settled his decision about unbelievers “before creation.” Paul, however, is talking about a temporary state of affairs for currently unbelieving Jews. Within the long list of descriptors Paul uses to describe these temporarily unbelieving Jews, three in particular are most often cited in Calvinist constructions of reprobation: *hated*, *hardened*, and *vessels of wrath*. These states of affairs, however, are temporary, not permanent. In Romans 9–11, God does not “hate” all unbelievers forever, just unbelieving Jews who are like Esau and who, only if they remain like him, will not be counted as sons. In Rom 11:28, these same “hated” unbelieving Jews are also “beloved” for the sake of their forefathers, who have been promised a massive Jew

²²N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2013), 1208.

²³Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1236–37.

and Gentile family. God is not hardening all unbelievers, just unbelieving Jews. In 11:25, God's hardening of these unbelieving Jews is "partial," and he will not harden them forever, only until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. The vessels of wrath in 9:22 are not all unbelievers but unbelieving Jews in distinction to vessels of mercy who are both Jews and Gentiles. In 11:31, these disobedient Jews, because of mercy shown to the Gentiles, will also be shown mercy. If, in Rom 11:11–32, the unbelieving Jews of Romans 9 are stumbling so as *not* to fall; if their failure will become full inclusion; if their rejection will become acceptance; if the leftover lump will be made holy, if broken branches will be grafted back in, then Romans 9 cannot support a doctrine of reprobation.²⁴

Finally, a reprobation reading of Romans 9 is ruled out by the fact that Paul clearly intends to demonstrate that the temporary resistance of Jews to the gospel has a redemptive function that brings salvation to all, including those very same unbelieving Jews. An ample intertextuality between Rom 5:6–21 and 11:11–32 makes the case for an analogical relationship in Paul's mind between the vicariousness of Messiah Jesus for the world and the vicariousness of unbelieving Jews for the world.²⁵ Rather than an expression of God's unconditioned choice of some individuals and not others, God's treatment of unbelieving Jews has a unique salvation-historical purpose. He is treating them in ways he is not treating everybody else because of their unique role within the promises to Abraham to save the world. Paul is telling the story of how the vocation of Israel (just like the vocation of the Messiah) has always included (and continues to include) rejection and suffering for the salvation of the world as well as acceptance and vindication. God is setting aside Gentile "disobedience" through Jewish "disobedience" thereby making a way for Gentile "obedience" (11:30–31) in a manner that is analogical to the way that Adam's "disobedience" was set aside by the "obedience" of Messiah Jesus (5:19).²⁶ Through the Messiah, God is graciously allowing his faithfulness to be reckoned to sinners while the condemnation of sinners falls on the Messiah. With unbelieving Jews, God's judgment against their unbelief is substituting for his rightly falling judgment against all, so that room is made for mercy toward the Gentiles. In Calvinist constructions of reprobation, there is no thought of a redemptive purpose in the casting away of the lost. As Grudem notes, reprobation is a display of God's "justice," not his mercy. But for Paul, mercy is the point of God's treatment of unbelieving Jews (11:30–31).

²⁴A. Chadwick Thornhill, *The Chosen People: Election, Paul and Second Temple Judaism* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 248.

²⁵"Much more" (5:9, 10, 15, 17; cf. 11:12, 24; no other occurrences in Romans); "transgressions" (4:25, 5:15, 16, 17, 18, 20; cf. 11:11, 12); "reconciliation" (5:11; cf. 11:15; no other occurrences in Romans); "enemies" (5:10; cf. 11:28; one other occurrence); "being saved" (5:9, 10; cf. 11:14, 26; only one other occurrence outside chs. 9–11); "life from the dead" (5:10, 21; 11:15); abundance/fullness (5:20 cf. 11:12).

²⁶N. T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans* in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 10 (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 681.

The redemptive aspect of Jewish unbelief is further substantiated by Paul's employment of the "jealousy motif" in Rom 10:19 and 11:11 and v.14. In 10:19, Paul quotes from the Song of Moses (Deut 32), a passage that deals with the salvation-historical necessity of judgment and salvation. In Rom 10:19, Israel's "jealousy" is negative, but the eventual redemption promised by Moses allows Paul to shift the motif in a positive direction in Romans 11. Paul explains in v.11 that Jewish rejection has resulted in the salvation of the Gentiles, which, in turn, will provoke his fellow Jews to jealousy, resulting in the salvation of some of them in fulfillment of Moses's prediction. Here, Paul can positively juxtapose "provoke to jealousy" and "save."

As in the Song of Moses, Paul believes that when Israel sees that God's favor has passed them over and been given to the Gentiles, they will be provoked to jealousy, in the sense of seeking to emulate. They will then be saved, in the same way as the Gentiles, by turning to the Lord.²⁷

In the Calvinist doctrine of reprobation, there is no possibility for jealousy over the salvation of others to be a gateway to redemption. If Paul's focus is on Jews (not everyone), the current time period (not all eternity), and ultimate redemption (not settled rejection), then Rom 9 does not support the doctrine of reprobation.

Specific Exegetical Examples of the Failure of Romans 9 to Support Reprobation

Three verses in particular figure heavily into Calvinist constructions of reprobation: Romans 9:13, 18, and 22. Paul's meaning becomes quite clear in each when the overall context is kept in mind, and it is clear that a doctrine of reprobation is far from a necessary conclusion.

Romans 9:13, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated

Here, Paul is not making a general point about how God deals with everybody, that all people can be put into two groups, those he has rejected from eternity and those He has accepted. Paul is making a specific point about how God has always dealt with and continues to deal with unbelieving Jews. Paul's conclusion of the whole argument about unbelieving Jews is that God will ultimately save them by faith. So, whatever "Esau I hated means," it cannot mean God reprobates certain people because Paul's point is *not* that God has *reprobated* unbelieving Jews. Like the unbelieving Jews, Esau has the right ethnicity and he has not "done anything good or evil," but he is rejected as a son because ethnicity and effort have never been the basis of salvation.²⁸ God purposes this as a demonstration of how he *does not* save. Paul is not citing the verse "Esau I hated" as proof that God sets his hatred on some individuals for no other reason than his own glory. Paul cites the verse as

²⁷Sigurd Grindheim, *The Crux of Election: Paul's Critique of the Jewish Confidence in the Election of Israel*, WUNT 202 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 163.

²⁸Thornhill, *The Chosen People*, 237.

a demonstration that God was never obligated to have beloved sons on the basis ethnicity or effort but by believing his promises. He decided long before Jacob and Esau were born to welcome children on the basis of a call that demands a response. Unbelieving Jews find themselves in precisely the same position as Esau (genetically related to Abraham, not “having done bad”) because they reject God’s call in the gospel, believing that law-keeping will justify them.

Romans 9:18, So, he has mercy on whomever he wills
and he hardens whomever he wills

Again, Paul is not making a general point about how God deals with everyone. He is making a specific point about how God deals with unbelieving Jews. Just as God hardened Pharaoh so that Israel would be saved and his name would be proclaimed everywhere, God is hardening ethnicity-trusting, Torah-trusting Jews in this moment to make the glory of his Messiah-trusting salvation among Jews and Gentiles evident to the whole world. God has mercy on Gentiles even though they do not have the right genetics or the Torah, and God hardens Jews who do. Paul will make the point in Rom 11:25 that this hardening of unbelieving Jews will last only until all the “fullness” of the Gentiles is achieved, then these unbelieving Jews will be saved, if they believe.²⁹ So, reprobation is ruled out of Rom 9:18 because the hardening Paul speaks of is specific to the Jews, not all unbelievers, it is temporary, not permanent, and it is for the maximizing of salvation for all, not the display of God’s justice.

Romans 9:22, Vessels of wrath, prepared for destruction

Once again, Paul is not making a general, philosophical, timeless point about how God deals with everyone. He is making a specific, salvation-historical, time-sensitive point about how God is dealing with unbelieving Jews. Paul draws the imagery of vessels from Jer 18:1–12. Jeremiah goes down to the potter’s house where he observes a potter crumpling an unwilling clay pot he has not yet fired and starting over. God’s point to Jeremiah is that he has the right to change what he will make of a nation based on its response to him. Paul’s point is that God has the right to change the destiny of Jews if they refuse to believe the gospel. Even though they have been shaped for blessing as God’s people, because they reject his gospel, they are now being shaped for wrath. This may not look fair from a human point of view. These Jews have the right pedigree, and they have the Torah, so it might be assumed they should be saved. But God has the right to make his plan for salvation the way he wants, and he wants to save through faith in the Messiah. Because salvation through faith in Messiah Jesus is “God’s purpose in election,” Gentiles, vessels formerly shaped for wrath are now being surprisingly re-shaped into vessels of mercy, while Jews, vessels shaped historically for mercy are now being shaped for wrath. In God’s plan, Jewish

²⁹Grindheim, *The Crux of Election*, 162.

rejection of the gospel makes clear to the world that God is powerful enough to save the way he chooses and that he will not give special treatment even to his own ethnic people if they do not trust in Messiah Jesus. This makes even more clear and glorious his salvation of Jews and Gentiles by grace. Yet, the illustration in Jeremiah rests on the fact that the pots have not yet been fired in the oven. If the unbelieving Jews will repent, the Potter has the right to remake them for mercy rather than destruction. This is exactly Paul's conclusion in Rom 11:30–31: "For just as you [Gentiles] once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their [Jews'] disobedience, so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy." It cannot be the case that the unbelieving Jewish "vessels of wrath" of 9:22 refer to a class of individuals permanently reprobated if this same group, disobedient in the present, have a destiny in which they will be shown mercy.

Romans 9 and Calvinist Exegesis

What does this approach to Romans 9 mean for Calvinist theological exegesis related to reprobation? Let's look again at Grudem. He cites Rom 9:17–22 (the "hardening" and "vessels of wrath" verses) as evidence of God's decision to save only some, giving no explanation, as though reprobation is so plain that no further analysis is needed. Grudem himself, however, acknowledges in the same section on reprobation that Rom 9:1–4 speaks of Paul's "great sorrow when he thought about unbelieving Jews who had rejected Christ."³⁰ Context demands that the problem of Jewish unbelief must still be in Paul's mind thirteen verses later. Like Pharaoh, unbelieving Jews are being hardened so that God's name might be made great in all the earth, namely, through the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles. Is hardness the final word on these unbelieving Jews? Hardly. Rom 11:25 speaks of the partial hardening of Jews until the Gentiles have come in, at which time salvation will come to all. Grudem goes on to quote Rom 11:7 "the elect obtained it but the rest were hardened" in support of the Calvinist idea that "God failed to choose all for salvation."³¹ But what does Paul go on to say about the "hardness" of the "rest"? Again, just a few verses later, Paul speaks of a partial hardening removed once the Gentiles come in.

Indeed, in quoting Rom 11:7, Grudem hints at what I imagine is the main Calvinist exegetical objection to my reading of Romans 9–11: that Paul is speaking of elect and reprobate Jews—elect Jews obtained salvation but non-elect Jews are rejected forever. Paul's resolution, however, in Romans 9–11 to the problem of Jewish unbelief is not merely that God is preserving a remnant of Jews who believe. That is certainly part of Paul's answer, given in Rom 11:1–6. God has indeed kept a remnant of believing Jews, Paul's own faith serving as an example.³² But what about the rest of the Jews, the "non-remnant?" In

³⁰Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 686.

³¹Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 685.

³²It is worth noting here that pre-conversion Paul serves as a perfect example of the soteriological

11:7, Paul does say that these unbelieving Jews are presently hardened. However, in v. 11, Paul asks (and this is critical) concerning these hardened, unbelieving, non-remnant Jews who have been the focus of the entire passage, “Did they stumble in order that they might fall?” The clear import of the question is, “Are these presently unbelieving, non-remnant, stumbling-over-the-gospel Jews destined to fall permanently?” Paul answers his own question in the strongest terms: “*mē genoito!* Absolutely not!”³³ God is using their missteps to bring Gentiles to faith in order to make these unbelieving Jews jealous in order to include them in the “fullness” of Israel. In v. 14, Paul says his ministry is about saving some of these jealous, stumbling but not falling, unbelieving Jews. If “the rest” are permanently hardened, why is Paul bothering to preach to them? That is exactly the thinking that Paul is arguing against here.³⁴ In v. 15, still referring to this single category of presently unbelieving, non-remnant Jews, Paul speaks of both their rejection and their acceptance. In v. 16, not only is the remnant of Jews “holy,” so is the rest of the lump of unbelieving Jews. The “remnant” root is holy and so are the branches.

In vv. 17–24, Paul observes that indeed these branches, these unbelieving, non-remnant Jews, *the rest*, have been broken off. Why are they broken off? Verse 20 tells us: “they are broken off because of unbelief.” Is this being broken off permanent? Verse 23: “Even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.” Paul draws his argument to a conclusion in vv. 25–31. The hardening of these unbelieving Jews is partial. The hardening will be removed, and all Israel, *the rest*, will be saved. They are not reprobate but “beloved” (v. 28). No longer vessels of wrath, they are objects of mercy (vv. 31–31).³⁵

Paul’s point in Romans 9–11 is not that there are elect and reprobate Jews. These categories must be read into the text. Paul’s long point beginning in Romans 9 is that presently unbelieving Jews, like Ishmael, are not saved by ethnicity; like Esau, not saved by works; like Pharaoh, hardened for world-wide proclamation; like exilic Israel, reshaped for wrath, no longer “My people” because of their faithlessness and, thereby, putting the glory of the grace extended to believing Jews and Gentiles on display. In Rom 10:1, Paul still desires the salvation of these unbelieving Jews who are pursuing righteousness by works. Salvation is by faith, and this good news must still be preached to them. In Rom 11:1, Paul asks, “Has God rejected his people?” Again, *mē genoito!* is the answer. He is preserving a remnant of Jews by grace through faith. He is hardening the rest presently so that the Gentiles can come in, making the rest of the Jews jealous, so that at the right time God can bring them to salvation—if they believe.

function of the “hardened,” unbelieving Jew. The Saul we meet in Acts 7:58 is an “enemy of the gospel,” opposing it with all his might. Yet, he only serves to drive it out of Jerusalem and toward the Gentiles. This is the consistent plot of Jewish rejection in Acts.

³³Thornhill, *The Chosen People*, 248.

³⁴Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 1236.

³⁵Glen Shellrude, “The Freedom of God in Mercy and Judgment: A Libertarian Reading of Romans 9:6–29,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 81 (2009): 315.

How then can Grudem find reprobation in Rom 9:17–22 and in 11:7 when the subjects of those verses remain the objects of God’s saving intentions? As Taylor warns above, Grudem’s exegesis suffers from an inappropriately atomistic and deterministic reading that causes him to make one mistake after another. In an attempt to make the case that God is not being disingenuous for feeling sorrowful over the condemnation of people he refuses to save, Grudem points to Paul’s sorrow over unbelieving Jews, as though Rom 9:1–4 is focused on Jews who will *never* believe.³⁶ But Romans 9–11 tells the story of the present, not permanent, unbelief of Jews. Of this same group, Paul says in 10:1, “My heart’s desire and my prayer for them is for their salvation.” Paul’s grief in 9:1–4 is not that they *cannot* believe but that they have not *yet* believed and stand, therefore, under God’s coming wrath. Only by completely ignoring the context can Grudem understand Paul as desiring and praying for the salvation of people he believes God does not desire to save.

In conclusion, it ought to be clear that the key texts from Romans 9 used to support the Calvinist doctrine of reprobation can be understood actually to be making the opposite theological case: God has not given up on a certain category of people. Since these texts do not demand the exegetically, theologically, and philosophically incoherent idea of reprobation, what verses are left to support this problematic doctrine? If we simply let Paul say what he wants to say in Romans 9–11, we have an incredible doctrinal truth: Even when, by our standards, it looks as though certain people will never come to faith, God never gives up on his plan through his people to pursue them. That is a sovereign God worthy of worship.

³⁶Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 686.