

## Is God Plotting Universal Salvation through Mercy? Rom 11:25-32 in Perspective

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### Introduction

In Rom 9:1, Paul begins a painful discussion about the fate of Israel in relation to the gospel, and in Rom 11:26, he reaches a strange conclusion concerning unfaithful Israel, "And so all Israel will be saved..."<sup>1</sup> To Israel belongs adoption, election, the patriarchs, the promises, the covenant, the law and from them, according to the flesh, the Messiah (Rom 9:4-5), yet Gentiles, who did not know the law, came to salvation. What happened to Israel? "They have not submitted to God's righteousness" (Rom 10:3). This is the righteousness by which God saves the sinner. So Paul asks one of those heart-breaking questions which ancient wisdom sages and oppressed righteous had asked in desperation concerning the purpose of righteous living (cf. Psa 73:13-16). "What advantage has the Jew? Or what is the value of circumcision?" What then is the reward of obedience to the law (Rom 3:1-2; Gal 3:19)? Election, promise, circumcision and the law have been identity marks of those who are members of the community of God's people. Paul could make no sense out of this failed life-long history of efforts to obtain salvation through the holy and divinely given law. He discovered in the very history of Israel that one is not saved through personal effort at righteous works, but through an apparent divine caprice to show mercy to whomever he wills (Rom 9:14-16). Yet, Paul was not content with knowing that Israel had lost out. Just when he remembered the character of God's covenant love, he came to the strange conclusion:

And so all Israel will be saved; as it is written, "Out of Zion will come the Deliverer; he will banish ungodliness from Jacob. "And this is my covenant with them, when I take away their sins." As regards the gospel they are enemies of God for your sake; but as regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all (cf. Rom 11:26-32).

From the foregoing exposition of Paul's thought, there appears to be some sought of scheming, intrigue or conspiracy on the part of God. Mercy, not adherence to the demands of the law, seems to be the norm of salvation. Israel was surprised and bewildered as the people witness a turnout of events that does not represent the point of departure. What was the point of departure? Circumcision and law were given as conditions for belonging and inheritance. From the Babylonian exile, the legal and ritual legislations have been used as boundary markers for the

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<sup>1</sup> "All Israel" is taken to refer to the totality of ethnic Israel, and not to the totality of believers comprising of Jews and Gentiles.

Jewish religion. But then, through the event of Jesus, uncircumcised Gentiles who did not know the law have experienced salvation through mercy. Paul sees a pattern in God's dealing which gives him the conviction that even recalcitrant Israel would equally be saved through mercy (Rom 11:26). It appears, mercy is being used as a plot to realize a universal salvation which will include both the righteous and sinners. This, certainly, has implications for theology and eschatology.

This essay investigates the program of mercy in the history of salvation in order to determine whether there is a case of divine plot to bring about universal salvation through mercy. A study of the terminologies of justice and mercy follows this introduction. This vocabulary study is intended to establish if the revelation of mercy, as Paul describes it, is consistent with activities that describe the two arms of God's rulership of the world – justice and mercy – in creation and salvation. A conclusion to the possibility of a divine intrigue is drawn from a theological study of Rom 11:25-32.

## Meaning of the Terminologies

### The Terminology of Justice

The definition of the word 'justice' which is given in this essay is derived from the meanings it inspires from the different context in which the word occurs in the Bible. The English word 'justice' is one of the terms that translate the Hebrew word *mišpāṭ*, which derives from the verb *šāpaṭ* and which means 'to judge', 'to rule', 'to govern', 'to decide', 'to pass a verdict', 'to arbitrate', 'to command' or 'to vindicate'.<sup>2</sup> As a *ma-noun*, *mišpāṭ* refers to a wide range of activities that derive from the action which the verb *šāpaṭ* signifies. It can refer to the place where the activity of the judge or the king takes place, the result of the action, or the means by which the action is performed.<sup>3</sup> This is why it has multifarious meanings, such as, law (*mišpāṭīm*), commandment, lawsuit, legal case, justice, verdict, decision, judgment, punishment or deliverance, legal right of a person, and rights proper to a king.<sup>4</sup>

Justice is descriptive of the activity of God for his people. The Lord is a God of justice (Isa 30:18); He loves righteousness and justice (Psa 33:5; Is 61:8); righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne (Psa 89:14; 97:2); all his works are truth and all his ways are justice... (Dan 4:37). Therefore, all of God's decisions for the wellbeing of creation is fruit of justice and faithfulness. Since ruling with justice is a quality in God, the texts show that if justice should be right, it must be a gift from God and it must correspond with the character of God's own justice. Therefore, God gives it as gift to the king (Isa 28:6; 42:1, 3; Psa 72:1-2). When God's *mišpāṭ* is with the king, it is a sign of God's presence and providence among his people. It is the guarantee for security in the land, victory, peace and wellbeing in the land (Psa 72:1-9). Those who imitate God in showing justice to the poor are called blessed, and they will in turn enjoy divine protection "Happy are those who consider the poor; the LORD delivers them in the day of trouble" (Psa 41:1). They are proclaimed blessed exactly because to do justice for the poor is fruit of righteousness.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Temba L. J. Mafico, "Just, Justice" in D. N. Freedman et. al. (eds.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, (Doubleday: New York, 1992), 1127.

<sup>3</sup> B. Johnson, "*mišpāṭ*" in G. J. Botterweck et. al. (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. IX (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 87.

<sup>4</sup> Johnson, "*mišpāṭ*", 88-96.

In many contexts, *mišpāt* describes actions taken on behalf of or against a category of people - the poor, resident alien, orphans and widows - and here it is generally translated as 'justice'.<sup>5</sup> Widows and orphans are a class of vulnerable people in both ancient and modern societies. They are often victims of exploitation by highhanded greedy relatives. According to Prov 13:23, "The field of the poor may yield much food, but it is swept away through injustice". When they are deprived, they could fall into a precarious state of destitution and servitude. A similar fate awaited the homeless stranger or resident alien, who supplied a cheap source of labor for wealthy people with large holdings.<sup>6</sup> The law forbade Israelites to exploit or oppress this class of people, drawing the motivation for this from Israel's memory of its past experience of homelessness and oppression in Egypt: "...for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exod 23:9).

The use of *mišpāt* in relation to the poor is found in different parts of the Bible. Positive and negative verbs are used to describe the actions denoted by *mišpāt*: to execute, to pursue, to distort, to pervert and to deprive. These verbs show that the major context for obtaining or being denied of justice is forensic. The terminology of mercy, instead, operates in a different context as the paragraphs below show.

### **The Terminology of Mercy**

The Old Testament (OT) speaks of mercy by using terminologies which may be translated in many other ways. Two expressions are used in particular: *Ḥesed* and *Rahamīm*. Of its 254 occurrences in the OT, the word *ḥesed* is found more abundantly in the Psalms (127x), but also in the book of Proverbs (10x).<sup>7</sup> It occurs in more than fifty Psalms (see especially Pss 59; 89; 106; 107; 118; 119) and in every verse of Psa 136 especially, God's *ḥesed* is invoked as a safeguard, "for his mercy endures forever". The word is employed for various kinds of interpersonal relationship; for instance, relationship between relatives (Ruth 2:20), friends (1 Sam 20:8,14), wife and husband (Gen 20:13), sovereign and subjects (2 Sam 2:5), host and guest (Gen 19:19), or between two parties (Gen 40:14).<sup>8</sup> In its secular use, *ḥesed* might imply a relationship of mutuality (Gen 21:23; Josh 2:12,14; 1 Sam 20:8,14f), and sometimes it is an act of goodness for another beyond what is expected or imagined (Gen 40:14). These texts describe actions which depict a person's loyalty or faithfulness in the terms of a relationship or a principle by which relationships should be governed in order to ensure continuity and stability. When *ḥesed* is used together with *'emet* (truth), it highlights qualities such as permanence, certainty and lasting validity, depicting not isolated acts but enduring attitude of goodness towards others.<sup>9</sup> Relationships with members of a family or intimate relationship between friends are two contexts that best explain the combination of *ḥesed* and *'emet*, because here, the protective function of the family requires members to preserve and

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<sup>5</sup> In this essay, these people are identified as 'the poor'. Prophetic warning against pervasion of justice abound (cf. Isa 29:21; 53:8; 59:8,11,15; Jer 5:28; 21:12; Amos 5:7; 6:12; Mic 3:8,9; 7:3; Hab 1:4,7) and the Psalms give echoes of outcry from this class of people against their oppressors.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Paul D. Hanson, *The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 46-47.

<sup>7</sup> See statistics of the occurrence of the word in H. -J. Zobel, "*Ḥesed*" in G. J. Botterweck – H. Ringren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. V (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 45.

<sup>8</sup> This observation is made on the grounds that *ḥesed* is usually used alongside the verb *'asā* (to do, to make) and the preposition *'im* (with), in a formulaic expression [*'asā' ḥesed 'im*], which shows that it is a relational concept, and that it includes an element of action for another. Cf. Zobel, "*Ḥesed*", 46-49.

<sup>9</sup> Hos 6:4 describes Israel's lack of zeal as a practice of *ḥesed* without *'emet*, "Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away". Cf. Zobel, "*Ḥesed*", 48, 50.

promote the life of their kin through constant mutual kindness.<sup>10</sup> *Ḥesed*, therefore, is the virtue that knits together family units or allies.<sup>11</sup> Considering the foregoing descriptions of the spheres and ways in which *ḥesed* is employed, the term refers to conduct in accord with social norms not based on legal notions, and is appropriately translated as loyalty, goodness, grace, faithfulness, love, mercy, steadfast love.

God is invoked and confessed in many biblical texts as the subject of *ḥesed*. There is a broad range of statements which show that it is in the nature of God to practice *ḥesed* and that all his acts are measured by it.<sup>12</sup> Typically, the psalmist says, “Deal with your servant according to your steadfast love, and teach me your statutes” (Psa 119:124).<sup>13</sup> Within the covenant relationship with Israel, God’s *ḥesed* could be given on condition of Israel’s obedience to the requirements of the covenant (Exod 20:5b-6; Jer 16:5b). On the other hand, God’s *ḥesed* is also shown to be unrestricted, where it remains unchanging and faithful even when Israel is unfaithful. In this sense, God’s *ḥesed* incorporates the virtue of forgiveness which gives it an unconditional character.<sup>14</sup> In the event of the great apostasy of Israel which would have caused the end of the covenant relationship, God proclaimed to Moses a divine self-concept which determines all his actions for and on behalf of Israel. It should be noted that the three words, *ḥesed*, *hen/hanan*, and *rah<sup>a</sup>mim*, are found together in the description of this event. According to the text of Exod 34:6-7, God’s eternal *ḥesed* would remain unchanging, even though God would not ignore sin.

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful (*rahūm*) and gracious (*hanun*), slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*ḥesed*) and faithfulness (*’emet*), keeping steadfast love (*ḥesed*) for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children’s children, to the third and fourth generation.

This text exposes the two pillars of God’s judgement, mercy and wrath, and affirms as Sir 47:22 and Jam 2:13 show, that mercy triumphs over judgment. God’s *ḥesed* comes to include a commitment to forgive Israel’s transgressions in order to save the goal of the covenant relationship. Hab 3:2 is a prayer that God, in spite of his anger, would have compassion.<sup>15</sup> This reality is represented very clearly in Psa 78:38-40:

Yet he, being merciful, forgave their iniquity, and did not destroy them; often he restrained his anger, and did not stir up all his wrath. He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again. How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness and grieved him in the desert!

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Zobel, “*Ḥesed*”, 52.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Zobel, “*Ḥesed*”, 53.

<sup>12</sup> A variety of verbs are used where God is the subject of *ḥesed*. God gives it (Mic 7:20), sends it (Psa 57:4), remembers it (Psa 98:3), continues it (Jer 31:3), causes it to be heard (Ps 143:8), makes it great (Ps 103:11), keeps it (Exod 34:7; 1 Kings 3:6) and takes it away (Jer 16:5). Cf. Zobel, “*Ḥesed*”, 54.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also, for instance, Is 54:10; Jer 9:24; Psa 106:45.a

<sup>14</sup> This character of God’s *ḥesed* goes beyond its secular meaning as conduct in accord with established norms. Cf. K. D. Sakenfeld, “Love (OT)” in D. N. Freedman (ed.), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 378-379.

<sup>15</sup> Sir 28:4 sees mercy and forgiveness as synonymous terms.

The reality of God's unconditional love is more evident in the second terminology that describes mercy, the word *rahamīm* or *rahūm* which is translated as love, mercy and compassion. It could be said, on the basis of its verbal derivative, that this word is the feminine synonym of the kind of faithfulness and commitment which *hesed* describes. It derives from the Hebrew word for a woman's 'womb' (*rehem*), and so it denotes the love of a mother for the child of her womb or brotherly love, that is, love for someone born from the same womb. *Rahamīm* exists within a relationship of a deep bonding between two parties, the type of deep bond that links a mother to her baby. Isa 49:15 applies this terminology in its description of God's dealing with Israel in a manner which depicts it as completely gratuitous and unmerited. Therefore, the meaning of the word includes a wide dimension of attitudes like forgiveness, tenderness, goodness, patience, understanding, and its antonym is legal inflexibility, coldness and insensitivity. When used to denote God's compassion, the word implies that God loves Israel the way a woman loves the child of her womb. In Isaiah and Hosea, especially, *rahamīm* describes the love of God for Israel, a love that is faithful and invincible, thanks to the mysterious power of God's motherly affection. Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you (Isa 49:15).

### **The Two Terms *Mišpāt* and *Hesed***

It is necessary to investigate briefly the meaning derived from texts where the same event makes God the subject both of the legal requirement of *hesed* and the unconditional attitude of *rahamīm*. It is more usual in biblical texts to find texts which combine *mišpāt* and *tsedek*, and which use them interchangeably as either complementary or synonymous terms. A comparable number of texts that combine *hesed* and *mišpāt* is not found. This is comprehensible because both terms belong to different spheres of relationship, one familial and the other legal. There are few texts which employ the use of these two words, and which have Yahweh as subject, and this is possible because within the covenant relationship, God's *mišpāt* collapses to include the virtue of patience and forgiveness. In texts like Pss 89:14; 101:1; 119:149, 156, where the two words are found together, Israel invokes God's *mišpāt* and his *hesed* in the face of oppression by other nations. *Mišpāt* for Israel would imply their being saved from the hands of those who oppress them, while *hesed* for them is a prayer for merciful concern because of their plight. Other texts combine the two words as if they were interchangeable. For instance, Isa 30:18 brings the two terms so closely that mercy is described as an outcome of God's justice, "Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him."

The word *hesed* is also used in the domain of the ethical requirements of religion, where it is placed in parallel relationship with the word *mišpāt*. Mic 6:8 and Hos 2:19; 12:6 and Zech 7:9 affirm that *hesed* and *mišpāt* are the two responses which God requires from all mankind and especially from rulers (Isa 16:5). Within this sphere of religious ethical requirement, texts like Hos 4:1-2 and Zec 7:9, which decry cases of persecution of the poor, the needy and the widow, describe injustice as absence of *hesed*, while Hos 6:6 is more precise in saying that practicing *hesed* is fruit of a mind that knows God and his ways. As the next paragraph shows, mercy is not simply God's motherly solicitude for Israel within the covenant relationship; it is a program of salvation that reaches back to the time of creation.

### **Mercy in the History of Salvation**

The story of mercy has deep roots reaching back to the creation of the world and to Israel's beginning. It is born out of God's struggle against evil on behalf of creation. From the beginning of God's relationship with human beings, God observed with regret and grief that every inclination of the thought of human heart was evil continually (Gen 6:5), meaning, that human ways are generated by a mind-set that inspires actions which are detrimental to the good of creation. The remark in Gen 6:5 might sound negative, but within its context (Gen 6-9), it is God's summative moral judgement on the anguish of the human condition from Adam onwards which, although attracting total annihilation (Gen 6:7), comprehends salvation in its outworking.<sup>16</sup> The failure of human responsibility inspires God's merciful and solemn decision to take personal responsibility of the effects of human frailty on the earth. "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done" (Gen 8:21). This solemn promise means that although the goal of creation is ordered through human dominion (Gen 1:28), God assures the accomplishment of creation's goal even as the inclination of the human heart continues to be evil (cf. Gen 8:21-22). God's solemn promise to protect creation from the effects of human evil is ratified by a covenant oath (cf. Gen 9:8-17). The renewal of blessing for Noah and his sons initiates a new form of God-human relationship that is sustained by the covenant (Gen 9), and also shows that the redemption of creation embraces human participation. This is the meaning of the renewed blessing for the human family within the context of the covenant (Gen 9:1,7).

From the time of Noah onwards, the covenant initiated a new form of relationship between God and human beings whose goal is the safeguarding of creation from the evil effects of human sin. It was not God's plan to leave human beings in their evil ways. The renewal of the blessing for Noah which was earlier given to Adam implies that human beings are created from the beginning to move gradually towards obedient collaboration in God's project for the world. This led to the election of Abram and his descendants, a people who would walk in God's ways and do His will (cf. Gen 17:1).

Israel became certain of God's gracious concern for them from the experience of the Exodus, when the Lord took the initiative to deliver the enslaved Israelites from bondage (Exod 3:7). Interpreting this experience, the prophet Isaiah says, "...in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old" (Isa 63:9). From the time of the exodus, and throughout the time of the sojourn in the land, Israel remained a disobedient and stubborn people. The prophets describe the sin of Israel as a continuous turning away from God and walking according to their own devices, rejecting the plans of God (Isa 65:2; Jer 2:13). In other words, the covenant people who had been schooled in the ways of God also suffered the misery of the human condition. As Israel lived out its gravest expression of sin against God in the worship of the Golden calf (Exod 34), God confronted their condition by recognizing the gravity of their sinfulness but rejecting to devour them in wrath (Exod 34:6-7). Rather, he revealed himself to them as merciful, forgiving and compassionate. God was angry with his people and he would have destroyed them in his just anger, but he overcame his anger through compassionate love. Since God has given assurance of his mercy and readiness to forgive sins, Israel, in her entire history, continually entrusted herself to God's mercy, both during times of political misfortune and when faced with the reality of her own sin (cf. Pss 103 and 145).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. MarySylvia Nwachukwu, *Creation-Covenant Scheme and Justification by Faith* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2002), 73.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, 4.

The experience of God's compassion left a lasting imprint in the life of Israel and throughout its history, it became for Israel the grounds for turning back and asking for mercy. The prophets describe God's compassion as a deep inner fire which brings out the 'godness' in God, an inner drive which overpowers him and conditions God's justice in a very profound way. Alongside other texts like Isa 54:7 and Jer 31:20, Hos 11:7-9 explains that compassion makes God's heart warm and tender in the face of Israel's sin. Israel's ongoing existence, in spite of sin, is thanks to God's nature as merciful and compassionate. God says in relation to Israel's sin,

My people are bent on turning away from me... How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my mercy grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come in wrath.

The contemporary reader might not understand the referents, Admah and Zeboiim, but these names seem to embody the meaning attached to a places like Sodom and Gomorrah, concrete examples of the consequence divine anger on sin. Hosea says in this text that Israel would have suffered the same fate if not thanks to God's mercy. Mercy compels God to renounce executing his just anger. It makes God's heart warm and tender. God's compassionate mercy embraces the entire human condition, made from dust and dependable on God for subsistence. Every stage of Israel's life experienced the touch of God's merciful love from the exodus till the exile. Thanks to the mercy of God, the history of Israel, which would have ended in disaster, turned out to be a history of salvation. This history prepares us to understand the fullest manifestation of this mercy for the entire creation in the event of Jesus

In New Testament (NT) texts where the verb *splangchnizomai* (Greek translation of *hesed*) describes Jesus' action, it is rightly translated as 'to be moved with compassion or mercy' and this describes the inner drive that moved Jesus to action. Jesus was moved in his innermost being with compassion for a helpless and harassed crowd without a shepherd (Matt 9:36; Mark 6:34), for the sick (Matt 14:14; 20:34), for the hungry (Matt 15:32; Mark 8:2), for the bereaved widow (Luke 7:13) and for the lost (Luke 17:20). In these texts, mercy describes Jesus as one who dedicated his entire ministry to the needy and the excluded.

One of the ways through which Jesus revealed the mercy of God is through his parables of the Kingdom of God. In his study of the parables, A.J. Hultgren classifies five of Jesus' parables as Parables of mercy or Parables of the Revelation of God because their central referent is God.<sup>18</sup> These are the parables of the Unforgiving Slave (Matt 18:23-35), the Workers in the Vineyard (Matt 20:1-16), the Lost Sheep (Matt 18:12-14; Luke 15:4-7), the Lost Coin (Luke 15:8-10), and the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32). These parables are characterised by delightful surprises and striking use of the hyperbole (exaggeration).

In the parable of the Laborers in the Vineyard in Matt 20, for instance, the deliberate use of the terminology of justice in this parable is striking: "...You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right" (Matt 20:4). The landowner and the first labourers agree to relate on the basis of an established just daily wage. This same arrangement was not required for all the other labourers who were hired later in the day. For them, the meaning of 'what is right' transmuted into

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. A.J. Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus. A Commentary* (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2000), 20-89.

what the landowner decided. At the end of the day, the landowner paid all of them the same daily wage, and this seemed very unjust. So the first comers complained and grumbled against the landowner.

The full meaning of the stories is also highlighted through bringing their elements and details into dialogue with the contemporary legal demands of the law. In the context of this dialogue with the demands of the law, one finds a deliberate use of the terminology of mercy in the stories which is designed to show how it is in the nature of mercy to exaggerate, to perplex and to cause the unexpected. Mercy goes beyond the medium of virtue and expresses the unexpected in God's dealing with human beings, while highlighting, at the same time, the extraordinary generosity of God's love.<sup>19</sup>

### **Theological Background of Rom 11:25-32**

This part of the work is a determination of the theological context of the text under study, and an interpretation of key theological words which Paul used to sustain the affirmation that in spite Israel's failure, God's word had not failed (Rom 9:6) and all Israel would be saved (Rom 11:26). Rom 11:25-32 is part of the climax of Paul's deliberative effort in Rom 9–11 to understand the place of Israel in the eschatological event of Christ. These three chapters of the letter to the Romans are held together by a meaningful argument that began with a *proposition* in Rom 9:6a, which affirms God's faithfulness in relation to his promise to Israel, "It is not as though the word of God had failed...". The argument is very theological in nature, being found between an introductory part (Rom 9:1-4), which laments the situation of Israel in relation to the Christ-event and concluding part (Rom 11:33-36), which praises the mystery of God's plan. The content of these two introductory and concluding sections gives the three chapters their first theological framework, apparently suggesting that the failure of Israel might be part of a bigger divine plan in salvation.<sup>20</sup> The central part of Rom 9-11 – Rom 9:5–11:32 – is structured by a series of rhetorical questions on the nature of the relationship between God and Israel, which mark out three sections of the argument: 9:6b-29 (God's sovereign freedom in creation and election); 9:30–10:21 (the righteousness of God and the failure of Israel) and 11:1-32 (Creation faith and the salvation of Israel). Each of these three sections of Rom 9-11 begin with a puzzle, and each expounds the initial thesis that God's word had not failed (Rom 9:6a).

A second theological framework is created by the terminology of covenant, *diatheke*, at the beginning (Rom 9:4) and end (Rom 11:27) of the three chapters. In 9:4, the covenant indicates Israel's special status as God's partner in creation. Moreover, Israel's relation to the patriarchs (Rom 9:3) makes her the bearer of divine blessings, but her lack of belief in Christ is a problem that torments Paul. In the review of the history of God's dealings with humanity which follows 9:1-4, Paul describes the failure of Israel with respect to God's righteousness, and how the election of Gentiles would serve the purpose of God to lead Israel to salvation. This is the argument of Rom 9:6-29, which describes how God's unconditional election of individuals and nations has always served God's purpose in creation and salvation. Paul discovers in this history that God acts in mysterious ways to the prevailing of his purpose over human unrighteousness. In 11:27, the covenant terminology appears again to specify how Israel's restoration is linked with God's universal action against human ungodliness in general. The theological argument here is the connection between God's covenant with Israel and God's eschatological act through Jesus

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Hultgren, *Parables*, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Nwachukwu, *Creation-Covenant Scheme*, 186.



Christ.<sup>21</sup> This connection is made by the theology of God's sovereignty in creation. What role does creation faith play in the extensive argument in Rom 9-11? The next paragraph describes how Paul answers this question in his use of two important terminologies in Rom 9-11 by which he drew the conclusion that God's purpose for Israel transcends her rebellion. Therefore, "all Israel will be saved" (Rom 11:26).

### **The Verb '*plassein*': The Defence of God's Sovereign Freedom in Creation**

The first section of Rom 9-11 begins with a puzzle. If Israel, the bearer of God's promise to the ancestors and God's partner in the covenant (9:4-5) failed to obtain the fruits of the promise revealed in Christ, the integrity of God's faithfulness to his promise seems to be highly compromised. And if Israel would be saved in spite of her rejection of God's appointed way of salvation (Rom 11:26), does this mean that God would relinquish his holiness in order to accommodate human weakness? The covenant had assured that Israel would remain the object of a valid and perpetual divine commitment and favour.<sup>22</sup> Paul was convinced, as he had argued in Rom 3:1-6, that in spite of Israel's failure, God remains faithful to his promise. Paul felt he had the task to defend God's faithfulness, and he did this with a far-reaching principle that "not all Israelites truly belong to Israel" (9:6). In other words, any assessment of God's faithfulness should be accompanied by a description of what constitutes the true Israel. Paul argues from tradition that "... the children of promise are counted as descendants" (Rom 9:7-8). In order to prove that not all physical descendants of the patriarchs belong to the covenant community, Paul uses an argument that is vital to the entire discussion in Rom 9-11, that is, the manner of divine election within the Abraham family, which separates the called from the rest (Rom 9:7-18). In what follows, Paul's defence of God is sustained by his appeal to two verbs *plassein* and *kalein*.

In the first part of his defence of God's faithfulness, Paul employs the potter-clay metaphor, a familiar image that designates God as creator in both OT and late Judaism. The potter-clay metaphor is rooted in the notion that God, the Creator, fashioned (*plassein*; Hebrew *yātsar*) the human race from clay, just as a potter fashions earthen vessels.<sup>23</sup> Both the metaphor and the verb are filled with deep theological content. They denote God's exercise of sovereign creative power and will over mankind, as well as humanity's role in terms of service to the purposes of God in creation (cf. Isa 29:16; 45:9; Jer 18:6; Wis 15:7; Sir 33:10-13).<sup>24</sup> Human beings are created to serve the purposes of God, just as every vessel serves the purpose of the potter. Paul's use of this metaphor in relation to Israel shows that this basic form of the Creator-creature relationship had characterized God's relation to Israel and to other nations. With it, he argued that God retains the freedom to determine how Israel is called to serve God's creative and salvific purposes at different stages of salvation history. The fact that God retains the supreme right to design the role with creatures play to the fulfilment of his creative purpose gives the impression that his action is arbitrary. This is why God's sovereign freedom encounters resistance from human beings,<sup>25</sup> an idea which Paul counters with appeal to the *exousia* (authority) of God over humans (9:21). The human being has no right to argue with God or to question his authority. The meaning of *plassein*

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Nwachukwu, *Creation-Covenant Scheme*, 186-187.

<sup>22</sup> The fulfilment of the promises to the patriarchs depended only on God's unilateral commitment through covenant (Gen 15:1-21; 22:16-18)

<sup>23</sup> Cf. C. Westermann, *Isaiah 40-66* (London: OTL, 1969), 203-206; B. Otzen, "yatsar" in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. VI, 257-265.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Nwachukwu, *Creation-Covenant Scheme*, 196-197.

<sup>25</sup> The participial verb *antapokrinomenos* in Rom 9:20 denotes one who disputes and resists God.

and its accompanying metaphor infer that God's creative act achieves a distinction among human beings, some being formed as vessels of wrath, while others are formed as vessels of mercy (Rom 9:22-23).<sup>26</sup> Paul sustains the idea of this distinction by introducing another terminology – *kalein* – which functions within the covenant history of Israel.

### **The Verb *kalein* and the Vessels of Mercy**

*Kalein* is the verb of election. As with the verb, *plassein*, the divine action of *kalein* also establishes a distinction between persons and between Israel and other nations. This verb designates God's election of persons in the Abraham family: Isaac and Jacob (9:7-12) and in the Church (Rom 1:6-7; 8:29-30; 9:24) whose goal is so that "...God's purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call" (9:11-12). The purpose of God's call is to show mercy (9:16) and to reveal his glory. From the viewpoint of the self-concept of the Jews as God's chosen people, the vessels of mercy should refer to Israel, while the vessels of wrath refer to the Gentiles. However, this net distinction between Israel and Gentiles has been blurred through a reversal of fortune that came about in the event of Jesus Christ. Gentiles have become vessels of mercy because of Israel's disobedience, just as Israel was the vessel of God's mercy because of the disobedience of the Gentiles (Rom 11:30-31). Among the Gentiles who have come to faith, God has left only a remnant of Israel (Rom 11:5). In Rom 1:8–3:20, Paul had laid the conceptual background of the blurring of this distinction in the ideas relating to wrath and mercy. In Rom 9:23-24, therefore, this verb *kalein* specifies the character of the vessels of mercy, defining them as those whom God has called according to his purpose, which is to manifest the God's glory and his merciful dealings as Creator.

The context in which the verb *kalein* occurs in some OT texts show that it belongs to the semantic field of restoration and historical divine saving acts (cf. Deut 32:6; Psa 139:16; Isa 43:1, 7; 44:2, 21, 24; 49:5, 8; 53:11; Jer 1:5;). This meaning becomes clearer in Isa 43:7 where the goal of election is expressed through the affirmation that everyone whom the Lord has called (*kalein*) is formed (*plassein*) for God's glory. In both the OT and inter-testamental literature, the verb *kalein* functions within the theology of creation, which uses reversal themes to speak of God and his power to make a way or to give water in the desert (cf. Isa 43:19-20; 44:3; 2 Macc 7:28). This verb also finds a home in the idea of creation by God's word (cf. Pss 33:6; 147:15-20; Amos 5:8; Wis 11:25). In Rom 4:17, Paul describes Abraham's faith in God as faith in the power of God "to call into existence the things that do not exist". This tradition is used by Paul to argue further that God's call is directed to a situation of nothingness where it creates life out of nothing and, in this way, revealing God's creative power and glory. Within the context of Romans, the situation of nothingness to which God's call is addressed is sinful humanity, including Jews and Gentiles, under God's wrath (Rom 1:18). Paul now demonstrates that the depraved state of humanity (Gen 4-11) which had led to the election of Israel now applies to the depraved state of Israel which was leading to the election of God's eschatological people in Christ, the Gentiles. Using the words of Hosea (2:1, 25), he describes it as a call from 'no people' to the 'people of God'.<sup>27</sup> The implication is that Gentiles are now being called to serve the purpose of election in the same way that Israel was called.

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<sup>26</sup> This distinction is chiefly functional and not soteriological, and this is deduced from the manner of Paul's argument. Nothing in the text indicates that the expression "vessels of wrath" connotes any negative soteriological value, since their function is to demonstrate God's power through his patience. Rather, it refers to the situation in which the vessels find themselves. Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Texas: Word Books, 1988), 557

<sup>27</sup> Hos 2:1, 25 speak of the restoration of Israel to the covenant relationship after a period of covenant unfaithfulness. Cf. Nwachukwu, *Creation-Covenant Scheme*, 203-204.

## Conclusion

Rom 11:25-32 is chosen, especially because it is Paul's theological summary of salvation history in which he shows that law and its demands were consistently undermined by God's expression of sovereign freedom through his power to call persons and peoples according to his overall purpose to show mercy. The last verse of our text (11:32) gives a conclusion that is as puzzling as the sentence in 11:26. The conviction that all Israel will be saved (v26) is supported by very strong belief in the covenant tradition that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable (v29), and that the God would cure Israel's ungodliness through forgiveness of their sins. The refusal of the gospel by a major part of Israel required that the question of Israel's ongoing election be posed again, "has God really rejected his people?" (Rom 11:1-2). Paul is confident that scriptural assurance<sup>28</sup> has not been falsified by Israel's rejection of the gospel. For him, the eschatological remnant, believers in Jesus, embodies the election by grace with defines Israel.

Moreover, the idea expressed in Rom 11:26 that God would give salvation to those who oppose his ways poses a question on the character of Paul's eschatology. In a general manner, it concerns the idea of the vessels of wrath to which Israel now belongs, and whom Paul claims would be saved. Surprisingly, Israel's situation is explained in terms analogous to the case of Pharaoh and the vessels of wrath (cf. Rom 9:17-23). Israel's refusal of the gospel has put her in the very position formerly occupied by the Gentiles. The argument in Rom 9:17-23 might easily leave the impression that God actually created the vessels of wrath for destruction. This would be a logical sequel to the idea of God's justice. Nevertheless, the effect of classifying Israel and Pharaoh as objects of God's action of hardening in Rom 9:17-18 and 11:7-10 is to overturn the possibility of such a conclusion. Paul confirms this in 11:12, "...their stumbling means riches for the world, and ...their defeat means riches for the Gentiles." This means that, even as a vessel of wrath, Israel is serving God's purpose to bring Gentiles to faith. If, therefore, recalcitrant Israel is not prepared for destruction, it also follows that God has prepared no vessel of wrath, neither Pharaoh nor the Gentiles, for destruction. In a way, these ideas are prelude to the perplexing conclusion in Rom 11:32 that "God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." The question is, if mercy consistently provided a program and character of salvation, would this imply that at the end, all would be saved? The righteous as well as sinners? This would certainly have implications for the doctrine of Hell and Purgatory.

Recognizing the theological difficulty of this conclusion, Paul's response is channeled to two directions. Firstly, he appeals to the sovereign freedom of God in creation and salvation, God's freedom exercised in the very act of creation and election which are geared towards his salvific purpose. The potter-clay metaphor and the idea of God's call explicate the meaning of God's sovereignty in creation which human beings should neither dispute nor resist. Secondly, Paul reconciled the meaning of covenant as God's promise of redemption for Israel. This understanding of covenant in Romans is reminiscent of the OT idea of promissory covenant, which is expressed as the freedom of God to restore Israel to a personal relationship with himself (for instance, Deut 30:6; Jer 31:31-34). In fact, the content of this covenant is the removal of sin. Paul finds firmer support for this in the prophecy of Isaiah (59:20-21),<sup>29</sup> a text which encloses ideas that belong to

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<sup>28</sup> He uses the language of 1 Sam 12:22 and the tradition of the remnant in 1 Kings 19 to dismiss the prospect of God's rejection of Israel, and shares the fundamental Jewish belief that God's purpose for Israel transcends her rebellion. See Sanh. 10,1, "All Israel have a share in the world to come".

<sup>29</sup> Paul's use of this text of Isaiah follows the LXX translation, one which differs considerably from the original Hebrew version. The LXX reading of the text emphasize God's action. In using the text, Paul gives it a Christological

the subject matter in question. In fact, Rom 11:27 describes that restoration of Israel as a taking away of their sins. This covenant tradition stands in fundamental antithesis to the theological ideas of God's justice. Paul had also posed the question of God's justice in Rom 3. If grace displaces justice, "...then how could God judge the world?" (3:6). If he subjects some people to disobedience or as vessels of wrath in order to have mercy on all (cf. 11:32) and to promote his glory, "why am I still being condemned as a sinner?" (3:8). Would this divine attitude not encourage sinners to persist in sin since good would come out of it? (cf. 3:8). In order to respond to these questions, Paul uses numerous references to the OT to show that God's word to Israel is filled with extensive promises of salvation, promises which underscore the priority of God's redemptive purpose for creation over Israel's failure in election. This is the theological tradition of God's *hesed* which includes a commitment to forgive Israel's transgressions in order to save the goal of the covenant relationship. Mercy is located in the broad context of God's covenant, where God's mercy is revealed as special power of love, a protective property of the familial sphere in which *hesed* functions. On this hinges the teaching on the relation between law and grace.

The essay has shown that mercy has been an integral part of the program of salvation that goes back to creation and which describes a consistent pattern of God's action. Although the description of salvation offered here seems to be in contrast with the idea of God's justice, the study of the two terminologies, *mišpāt* and *hesed*, reveals that the two words, although operating in different contexts (legal and familial) and in different spheres of relationship, both are considered as essential aspects of God's rulership of the world. Within the covenant relationship, God exercises both *mišpāt* and his *hesed* for Israel's salvation, to the extent that *hesed* is an expression of *mišpāt* for Israel. In fact, Paul sums up the entire history of salvation in Romans when he says that the righteousness of God is revealed definitively in the atoning death of Jesus for sinners (cf. Rom 3:21-26).

Lastly, Paul invites to a caution all those who might be tempted to resist this expression of God's sovereign creative power. According to the text of Rom 11:25, the particular manner by which God would save all through mercy is a mystery in God's plan. In spite of his appeal to the promissory covenant tradition and to the ideas of God's creative power by which he channels all to his purpose, would Paul's appeal to mystery mean that this enigmatic character of salvation has no precedence in scripture? The effect of ending this essay with a question is to underscore the fact that God's exercise of mercy would not stop to surprise and to produce the unexpected.

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interpretation by reading the first phrase of the quotation "*heneken Zion*" [for the sake of Zion] as "*ek Zion*" [from Zion], and conflated the text with another text (Is 27:9) which also features the motif of God's removal of sin from Israel. Christ is the redeemer from Zion who removes the sins of his people and who thereby recues from the coming wrath. The impact of Is 27 on this is that this would happen as an unmerited blessing. Cf. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 682.