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# THE CHOSEN REMNANT AND ITS ROLE IN THE FINAL DESTINY OF THE PEOPLE OF IS- RAEL ACCORDING TO THE EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS 9-11

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Summary

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**Keywords:** Epistle to the Romans, Romans 9-11, chosen remnant, hardening of the heart, history of salvation, Pauline theology, divine promises, divine election, Zion, salvation of Israel, Judeo-Christianity.

## Introduction

The Epistle to the Romans is considered a monumental work of the Apostle Paul, being the longest and the most theologically and doctrinally rich. It holds a place of honor in Western Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant, due to its extensive development of the doctrine of justification by faith. Prominent theologians such as Origen, St. John Chrysostom, St. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin considered it the foundation of the theology of salvation by faith. While Protestant and Catholic theology grant it a special status, viewing it as a kind of *Summa Theologiae Pauli*, Orthodox theology values it equally with the other Pauline epistles, without seeing it as a synopsis of the Apostle's entire theology.

This doctoral thesis focuses on chapters 9-11 of the Epistle to the Romans, a section of particular theological complexity that addresses the problem of the unbelief of the majority of the Jewish people in Jesus as the Messiah. This issue, also called the "Jewish problem of Christianity," calls into question God's faithfulness to His promises and the continuity of the plan of salvation. The purpose of this approach is to provide a response to the challenge posed by the Jewish unbelief in the messiahship of Jesus. In the Romanian theological space, scholarly research on these chapters is lacking, often being treated incompletely and under the influence of Western theologies. This doctoral thesis represents an attempt to fill this gap. To this end, the thesis has thoroughly analyzed themes such as divine election, the hardening of the heart, the role of the chosen remnant, and the final destiny of the people of Israel, from an Orthodox perspective.

The methodology adopted is deductive, starting from general theological principles and applying them to the specific case of Israel in Romans 9-11. Exegetical, historical-critical, and theological methods have been used, correlated with patristic interpretations, to offer a balanced and nuanced perspective. The structure of the work follows the argumentative thread of the Apostle Paul: election, fall, and salvation, with the theme of the remnant serving as a recurring motif.

The historical context of the Epistle is essential for understanding chapters 9-11. Written around 56-57 AD from Corinth, the Epistle addresses a Christian community in Rome that was

not founded by Paul. Recent research demonstrates the dual character of the Christian community in Rome, being composed of both Christians of Jewish origin and those of Gentile origin. Tensions between these two groups were exacerbated by the Edict of Emperor Claudius in 49 AD, which expelled the Jews from Rome. In the absence of Jewish Christians, the Hellenistic Christian communities became autonomous from the synagogue. Upon the return of the Jews after the death of Claudius in 54 AD, the problem of reintegration and theological divergences, especially regarding the Gospel preached by Paul, became acute. In this context, the problem of the unbelief of the majority of Jews took on an essential role for the communities in Rome, questioning both the Gospel of the reception of the Gentiles proclaimed by the erudite Apostle and the identity of Jesus as the Messiah. Therefore, chapters 9-11 are not a later insertion but a vital component of the Pauline argument, intended to convince the community in Rome that, despite the unbelief of the Jews, God's plan of salvation remains unshaken.

## **The Promises – The Guarantee of God's Faithfulness**

In chapters 9-11, the Apostle Paul develops a theodicy to explain the refusal of the majority of Jews to accept Christ. His argument is based on fundamental concepts of Jewish theology, such as salvation history and the divine promises. The fulfillment of the Old Testament promises and prophecies in Jesus of Nazareth represents the central argument in favor of His messiahship.

The concept of "salvation history" refers to God's action in time for the salvation of humanity. While Roman Catholic theology has more recently acknowledged experiences of grace and possibly even salvation outside the Judeo-Christian tradition, Orthodox theology prefers the term "economy of salvation" and maintains that divine grace is manifested specifically through the chosen people (Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament). The divine promises are landmarks in this economy, culminating in the incarnation of the Logos.

Paul begins his argument in Romans 9 by listing the spiritual privileges of Israel: adoption as sons, the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the Law, the temple worship, and the promises. These gifts, culminating in the fact that Christ, in terms of his human ancestry, comes from Israel, highlight the special status of this people. The rejection of the Messiah by the majority of the Jews raises a fundamental dilemma: has the word of God failed? Paul categorically rejects this idea ("...it is not as though God's word had failed...") and formulates his central thesis: "for not all who are descended from Israel are Israel."

To demonstrate this principle, Paul turns to the history of Israel's election, showing that it has always been based on the sovereignty and absolute freedom of God, not on physical descent or human works. He uses two illustrative examples:

- **Isaac and Ishmael:** Although both were sons of Abraham, only Isaac, the son of the promise, was chosen as heir, not Ishmael, the son of the flesh. This demonstrates that the true identity of Israel is based on divine election, not genealogy.
- **Jacob and Esau:** Both sons of Isaac and twins, yet God chose Jacob over Esau before they were born or had done anything good or bad. This emphasizes that divine election is independent of human merits, being determined exclusively by God's sovereign plan ("in order that God's purpose in election might stand").

This divine freedom is manifested not only in election but also in mercy and hardening. Paul raises the question: "Is God unjust?" and answers by quoting from Exodus: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." Thus, divine judgment transcends human moral law, being governed by His sovereign mercy.

Furthermore, Paul uses the example of Pharaoh to illustrate that God's sovereignty is also expressed through rejection or hardening. God says to Pharaoh: "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you" (Rom 9:17). This should not be interpreted as predestination to damnation, but as a demonstration that human opposition cannot thwart the divine plan. The Church Fathers, such as Theophylact, argue that God did not harden Pharaoh directly, but indirectly, through His long-suffering, which allowed his wickedness to be fully manifested.

Paul concludes this segment of his argument with the analogy of the potter, who has power over the clay to make vessels "for honorable use" or "for dishonorable use." The purpose is not to deny human freedom but to emphasize the absolute authority of the Creator and to silence any human claim to judge God. Through this sovereignty, God is free to extend His election to the Gentiles, integrating them into His people alongside a faithful remnant of Israel. This idea is both the goal and the conclusion of the Pauline theodicy. Thus, despite the unbelief of the majority, God's word has not failed but has been fulfilled in an unexpected way, by reducing Israel to a remnant and by including the Gentiles.

## The Hardening of the Heart – A Consequence of the People's Infidelity

The concept of the "hardening of the heart" is essential for understanding the Pauline theodicy in Romans 9-11. The Apostle uses this motif, drawn from the Old Testament, to explain both the sovereignty of God and the failure of the majority of the people of Israel to recognize the Messiah in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

The terminological analysis of the Hebrew Old Testament reveals three main terms for hardening (ḥāzaq, kābēd, qāšāh), which, although having different nuances, converge on the idea of resistance, stubbornness, and opposition to the divine will. The paradigmatic case is that of Pharaoh. In the Egyptian cultural context, a "hard" or "firm" heart was a sign of power and royal authority. God uses precisely this symbol of Egyptian power to manifest His absolute superiority. By hardening Pharaoh's heart, YHWH unmasked the fragility of the idolatrous system he represented.

The dynamic of hardening is complex, involving an interaction between human will and divine action. Scripture mentions both that Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Exod 8:15, 32; 9:34) and that God hardened his heart (Exod 9:12; 10:20, 27). This should not be understood as a contradiction but as a process. Hardening originates in human disobedience and pride. Pharaoh already displayed an attitude of opposition to the divine plan, motivated by geopolitical fear of the demographic growth of the Israelites (Exod 1:9-10). God's intervention through Moses and the plagues did not create this hardening *ex nihilo* but provoked and intensified it. Thus, God's long-suffering (Rom 9:22), instead of leading to repentance, made Pharaoh even more obstinate. In the end, God seals this state as an act of judgment, reinforcing the opposition that man has freely chosen.

The Apostle Paul applies this paradigm to the situation of Israel in his time. Just as Pharaoh opposed the divine plan for the liberation of Israel, so the majority of Jews opposed the fulfillment of the messianic promises in Christ. Israel's failure stems from a "zeal... not based on knowledge" (Rom 10:2): not knowing the righteousness that comes from God, which is a gift received through faith in Christ (Rom 3:21-26), they sought to establish their own righteousness, based on the works of the Law (Rom 10:3). Since no one can fulfill the Law perfectly (Rom 3:23), this path leads to failure. Therefore, Christ is the "end (τέλος) of the law" (Rom 10:4), in the sense that He is both its goal and its fulfillment. By refusing to submit to this new divine

righteousness, Israel stumbled over the "stumbling stone" (Rom 9:32-33), that is, Christ, instead of relying on it for salvation.

Similar to the case of Pharaoh, the hardening of Israel has a providential purpose in salvation history. Their temporary fall has opened the way for the salvation of the Gentiles (Rom 11:11). This inclusion of the Gentiles is, in turn, meant to provoke Israel to jealousy and, ultimately, to lead it to choose God's path to salvation. Thus, hardening is not an arbitrary or definitive act, but a stage in God's complex plan, who, in His inscrutable wisdom, uses even human disobedience to fulfill His purpose of universal mercy (Rom 11:32).

## **The Chosen Remnant – The Guarantee of Divine Faithfulness**

The concept of the "remnant" (Hebrew: *שְׁאֵר*, *יִתָּר*, etc.) plays a crucial role in Paul's argumentation and in Old Testament theology. In the historical context of the ancient Middle East, such as in Assyrian inscriptions, the term had an exclusively negative connotation, designating the despised survivors of a conquered nation, condemned to a precarious fate.

In the Old Testament, the concept is ambivalent. Initially, it has a negative sense, representing the divine judgment by which Israel, due to its infidelity, is numerically reduced (Lev 26:36; Deut 28:62). This reduction contradicted the promise made to the patriarchs that Israel would be as numerous as the stars of heaven. However, gradually, especially in the prophetic writings of the exilic and post-exilic periods, the concept acquires a predominantly positive valence. The remnant no longer signifies only punishment but becomes the symbol of hope, the faithful group through which God ensures the continuity of His people and thereby the fulfillment of the promises. Thus, the remnant becomes the guarantor of God's faithfulness to His covenant. The election of this remnant is a sovereign act of divine grace, independent of human merits.

The Apostle Paul adopts this concept and integrates it into his theology in Romans 9-11 to answer the dilemma of the unbelief of the majority of Jews. He uses both dimensions of the concept. On the one hand, quoting from Isaiah, he shows that the reduction of Israel to a remnant is a deserved form of judgment for disobedience, similar to that of ancient times: "Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved" (Rom 9:27).



On the other hand, Paul emphasizes the positive role of the remnant as proof that God has not rejected His people (Rom 11:1-2), because without this remnant left by God, Israel would have become like Sodom and Gomorrah (Rom 9:29). Applying these quotes from the prophet Isaiah to the context of the epistle, the Apostle offers himself as an example, an Israelite from the tribe of Benjamin, who is part of this "remnant chosen by grace" (Rom 11:5). This election, as in the Old Testament, is not based on works of the Law, but on divine grace. The faithful remnant of Paul's time, formed by the Jews who accepted Christ, ensures the continuity of the true Israel, the chosen people of God.

An innovative aspect of Pauline theology is the extension of this concept. The remnant no longer has a strictly ethnic meaning. Through faith in Christ, the Gentiles are "grafted" into the good olive tree, which is Israel, alongside the natural branches that remained faithful (the remnant) (Rom 11:17). Thus, the Church, formed of Jews and Gentiles, becomes the new framework of God's people, the continuation of the authentic Israel. The ethnic remnant of Israel that believed in Christ loses its exclusively ethnic role and acquires a purely spiritual one, allowing for the universalization of the plan of salvation.

Finally, the remnant also acquires a typological and eschatological role. It is not only proof of God's faithfulness in the present but also the firstfruits and the guarantee of the future salvation of "all Israel." The existence of this faithful remnant demonstrates that God's plan for His people has not ended and prefigures the final moment when, as Paul prophesies, the hardening of the majority will be lifted.

## **The Deliverer from Zion and the Final Destiny of the People of Israel**

The conclusion of the Apostle Paul's argument in Romans 9-11 culminates in the revelation of a "mystery" (μυστήριον) concerning the final destiny of the people of Israel: "Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob'" (Rom 11:25-26). This enigmatic passage has generated numerous interpretations throughout history, centering on three key questions: when, how, and who exactly from Israel will be saved.

To understand this text, the concept of "Zion" is essential. In the Old Testament, Zion evolves from a topographical place (the city of David, then the Temple in Jerusalem, and even Jerusalem itself) to a complex theological symbol, representing the presence of God, the place of the covenant, the center of the messianic kingdom, and, metaphorically (as mother, bride, or unfaithful wife), the dynamic relationship between God and His people. In the New Testament, the significance of Zion is transferred to the Church, the new people of God (Heb 12:22), and to the heavenly Jerusalem, the eschatological destiny of believers (Rev 21:2).

Paul quotes from Isaiah 59:20 but makes a significant modification: instead of "he will come *to* Zion," he writes "the deliverer will come *from* Zion." This deliberate adaptation suggests that the Deliverer (Christ) not only comes to the aid of His people but that He Himself originates from their midst. In a Christian context, this must be the messianic community, the Church, the new Zion.

Interpretations regarding the manner and timing of this salvation vary considerably:

1. **The Predestinarian Interpretation:** Based on a literal reading of divine sovereignty in Romans 9, this perspective, historically supported by Calvin, asserts that the salvation or damnation of each individual (including Jews) is decreed from eternity. Thus, "all Israel" would refer to the totality of the elect Jews from all times, whose salvation is predetermined. This view is, however, difficult to reconcile with Paul's prayer and missionary efforts for the salvation of his kinsmen (Rom 10:1; 11:14).
2. **The Indeterminist Interpretation:** This view holds that divine election is based on God's foreknowledge of who will believe. Thus, "all Israel" would be the totality of Jews who, throughout history, freely respond to the call of the Gospel. However, this perspective also diminishes the character of a culminating and collective event that the Pauline text seems to suggest.
3. **The Sonderweg/Parallelweg ("Special/Parallel Path") Interpretation:** Popular in contemporary Western theology, this theory postulates that Israel has a path to salvation distinct from the Church, based on God's irrevocable covenant. The salvation of "all Israel" (understood as all Jews of all times) would be realized at the Parousia, through a sovereign act of Christ's grace, without requiring a prior conversion to Christianity. This view, however, comes into direct conflict with Paul's

central thesis that there is no salvation outside of faith in Christ (Rom 10:9-14), making it difficult to believe that the "mystery" to which Paul refers would be a special path for Israel.

4. **The Historico-Eschatological and Patristic Interpretation:** This perspective, which seems most consistent with Pauline thought and Orthodox tradition, understands Israel's salvation as a future historical event, but with eschatological significance, preceding the Parousia. "All Israel" does not refer to every Jew of all time, but to the people of Israel as a collective entity, to a future generation that will convert *en masse* to faith in Christ. This event will not be the result of a proselytizing mission but will be triggered by a major divine act ("the appearing of the Lord from Zion"), possibly linked to apocalyptic events such as the coming of Elijah (as some Fathers suggest) and the fall of the Antichrist. The conversion of the Gentiles ("the fullness of their number") plays a causal role, stirring Israel's jealousy and leading it to recognize its own Messiah. The Church (the Zion of the New Testament) has an essential role, not of a proselytizing mission, but of bearing witness to the experience of the one revealed in Zion. That moment will cause the faithful remnant of the Gentiles to reconcile and unite with the believing majority of Israel, fully realizing the unity of God's people, "one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16).

## General Conclusions

This work demonstrates that the theodicy of the Holy Apostle Paul in Romans 9-11 fits perfectly within the logic of salvation history, reinterpreting Old Testament concepts such as promise, hardening, and remnant in a Christological key. Paul shows that, despite the unbelief of the majority of Jews, the word of God has not failed, because divine election has always been based on grace and promise, not on ethnicity or works.

The hardening of Israel, similar to that of Pharaoh, is a complex reality, being both a consequence of human refusal and an instrument in the divine economy, allowing for the salvation of the Gentiles.

The central concept is that of the remnant. In the Old Testament, it ensured the ethnic and spiritual continuity of the chosen people. In the New Testament, the remnant of Jews who believed in Christ becomes the nucleus of the Church, the authentic Israel, to which the Gentiles are grafted. This remnant not only guarantees God's faithfulness to His promises in the present but also serves as the firstfruits and prefiguration of the future restoration of the entire people.

The final destiny of Israel remains a "mystery," a future eschatological event, not necessarily apocalyptic. It will consist of a mass conversion of a generation of Jews to faith in Jesus Christ, triggered by a major divine intervention in history. The Church, the New Testament Zion, will play a crucial role of witness in this process. Thus, the cycle of salvation history—covenant, infidelity, punishment, and restoration—will find its final fulfillment when the faithful remnant of the Gentiles and the converted majority of Israel unite into a single people of God, under the shepherding of the one Deliverer who came from Zion.