

How do you respond to Romans 9?

By Greg Boyd

The Deterministic Interpretation of Romans 9

Many people believe that [Romans 9](#) demonstrates that God has the right and power to save whichever individuals he wants to save and damn whichever individuals he wants to damn. I'll call this the "deterministic" reading of [Romans 9](#), for it holds that God determines who will be saved and who will be lost.

On first glance, it may seem that the deterministic interpretation of [Romans 9](#) has a strong case. For in this passage Paul explicitly says that God "has mercy on whomever he chooses and he hardens whomever he chooses" (vs. 18). He then illustrates God's sovereign election by referring to God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael (9:7-8) and of Jacob over Esau (9:10-13). Regarding this latter choice Paul writes:

"Even before [Jacob and Esau] had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, not by works but by his call) [Rebecca] was told, 'The elder shall serve the younger.'

As it is written,
'I have loved Jacob,
but I have hated Esau'" ([Rom. 9:11-13](#)).

Without regard to anything Jacob or Esau did, God chose to "love" Jacob and "hate" Esau. Hence, Paul concludes, God's choice of people "depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy" ([Rom. 9:16](#)).

The support for the deterministic interpretation seems to grow even stronger as Paul goes on to depict God's relationship to humans as a relationship between a potter and his clay. God has the right to fashion us, his clay, however he sees fit. And this is precisely what he does, according to Paul.

"Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured

with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction; and what if he has done so in order to make known the riches of his glory for the objects of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory” (Rom 9:21-23).

According to the deterministic interpretation, Paul is teaching that God simply fashions some vessels for destruction in order to display his wrath and power and other vessels for mercy in order to display his mercy. He hardens the former and has mercy on the latter. And this hardening and granting mercy is not based on anything God finds in the vessel. It is simply based on God’s free decision. If this seems unfair, as it undoubtedly does, Paul’s response is simply to invalidate the sentiment: “[W]ho indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’” (Rom 9:20).

So, the case for the deterministic interpretation initially looks strong. Nevertheless, I think it is mistaken. Indeed, I shall argue that a central point of Romans 9 is to argue *the exact opposite* of the conclusions drawn from the deterministic interpretation. For, in contrast to the deterministic interpretation, God is not an arbitrary, deterministic deity. He rather is wisely flexible in his dealings with humans.

I will offer six arguments in response to the deterministic interpretation.

1. The Absoluteness of Christ and the Universality of God’s Love

First, as with all theological issues, we must begin and end all our reflections on the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the one and only Word of God (Jn 1:1), the image of God (Col 1:15) and the perfect expression of God’s essence (Heb 1:3). He supersedes all previous revelations and can be superseded by none. He is the definitive revelation of God.

The deterministic interpretation of Romans 9, I believe, is in tension with the God we find revealed in Jesus Christ. Jesus dying on the cross for his enemies reveals the essence of what God is like — God is love. In contrast to this, the deterministic reading of Romans 9 forces us to conclude that this is only partly true of God, for it only applies to some people (viz. God’s “elect”). Behind the beautiful portrait of God in Christ, we find a deity who is unilaterally determining some to be saved and some to be damned, all for “his glory.” This means the revelation of God

in Christ is pen-ultimate. It doesn't really reveal the heart of God. Calvary conceals God as much as it reveals God.

If we rather resolve that Jesus *is* our definitive picture of God, and that this picture cannot be placed alongside of or qualified by any other, then we must conclude that there is something amiss with the deterministic interpretation of **Romans 9**. For Christ reveals, and the biblical witness confirms, that God's love is universal, his love is impartial, his love is kind, and his love desires all to be saved (e.g. **I Jn 4:8**; **Duet 10:17-19**; **2 Chron 19:7**; **Ezek 18:25**; **Mk 12:14**; **Jn 3:16**; **Acts 10:34**; **Rom. 2:10-11**; **Eph 6:9**; **I Tim 2:4**; **I Pet 1:17**; **2 Pet. 3:9**).

2. Has God Broken Covenant?

Second, the deterministic interpretation of **Romans 9** assumes that Paul is concerned with individual salvation in this chapter. But, in point of fact, this is not the issue Paul is addressing. The expressed issue Paul is addressing is whether or not "the word of God had failed" (**Rom 9:6**). That is, had God's promise to be the God of the Jews and to have them as his covenant people been rescinded?

The question was a burning one for Paul, for to many Jews this shocking conclusion seemed to follow from what Paul was preaching. Most Jews of the day understood God's covenantal faithfulness toward them to depend on two things: their nationality and their obedience to the law. If what Paul was preaching was true, however – that is, if salvation was available to anyone, including Gentiles, simply on the basis of their faith – then neither a person's Jewish nationality nor their obedience to the law counted for anything (cf. **Gal 5:12**). It seemed that the uniqueness of the Jewish identity and calling had been undermined.

Even worse, it now seemed to be working against them. Because they strove for righteousness based on the external observation of the law (works) instead of faith, they were now being hardened – as evidenced by the fact that so few believed in Jesus (**Rom 9:31-32**). This meant that, if Paul's Gospel was true, the very ones whom God made covenant promises to *were now being hardened!* Hence it looked like "the word of God had failed."

This is the question Paul is addressing in **Romans 9** (as well as in chapters 10 and 11). It's a question of God's fidelity to Israel as a nation and the basis by which God makes anyone a covenant partner. *It has nothing*

whatsoever to do with how God elects individuals to salvation. We are misguided if we try to use this passage to answer this question.

3. Election to Vocation, Not Salvation

The way Paul answered this objection also shows that his concern was with God's relationship to a nation, not with individual salvation. Paul refuted the idea that God's covenant promises had failed by showing that God's covenant promises were never based on a peoples' nationality or external obedience to the law. Rather, Paul argued, God had always exercised his sovereign right to choose whomever he wanted to choose.

Paul illustrated his point by referring to God's choice of Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, made without any consideration for their attributes or merits (9:8-13). Both examples underscore God's right to choose whomever he wishes, for both choices were made ahead of time and both were wholly unexpected. Moreover, both choices reversed the role of primogenitor, both concerned individuals who were not exemplar in their character, and most surprisingly – and telling — Isaac was supernaturally conceived.

In offering these examples, Paul was defending God's right to choose whomever he wants and to do so by any means he chooses. Hence, Paul is arguing, it shouldn't be shocking to Jews if God now chooses to enter into a covenant with Gentiles simply on the basis of their faith. He's always been a God who could do whatever he wanted. At the same time, it is important to remember that in using Isaac and Jacob to illustrate God's prerogative to choose whoever he pleases, Paul was not concerning himself with the eternal destinies of people. His concern was solely to show God's sovereignty in electing people to a historical vocation.

To underscore God's sovereign prerogative, Paul emphasized the arbitrary way God brought about a chosen people, through Isaac and Jacob, whose mission was to serve God and the world by being a nation of priests (*Isa 61:6*) and a "light to all the nations" (*Isa 42:6; 49:6; 60:3*). They were to be the means by which all the nations of the world would be blessed by hearing about the one true God (e.g. *Gen 12:2-3; 18:18; 22:18; Ps 67:1-2; Isa 2:2-4; 55:5; 61:9-11; 66:19-20; Jer 3:17; Rom 4:12-18*). Their election as a nation was always primarily about service, not individual salvation.

Paul emphasized the arbitrariness of God's choice of the Jews to unsettle those who thought God's word had failed because he had rendered their nationality and external observation to the law obsolete in Christ. Throughout [Romans 9](#) through 11 Paul was at pains to show that God's goal all along had been to reach out beyond the borders of Israel and win the whole world ([Rom 9:25-26, 33](#); [10:10-21](#); [11:11-12](#)). Indeed, Paul insisted God was yet going to attain his goal. But since Israel as a nation had rejected the Messiah, Paul argued, God was now going to use their blindness rather than their obedience to achieve it ([Rom. 11:11-32](#)).

In any event, we are reading far too much into [Romans 9](#) if we think that Paul was suggesting that Ishmael or Esau—or anyone else not chosen in the selection process by which God formed the Jewish nation (e.g. all of Joseph's brothers?) — were individually damned. Paul is simply not concerned in this chapter with individual destinies. Indeed, he uses the examples he does precisely because they represent more than individuals: *they represent nations*. In choosing Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, in other words, God was illustrating his choice of Israel (the descendants of Isaac and Jacob) over the Moabites (the descendants of Ishmael) and the Edomites (the descendants of Esau). Again, this didn't mean that all Moabites or Edomites were eternally lost. It just means that these nations were not chosen for the priestly role in history for which God chose the Israelites.

This national focus is emphasized in the fact that the Old Testament passage Paul cites to make his point about Esau ([Malachi 1:2-3](#), "I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau" [[Rom 9:13](#)]) is explicitly about the country of Edom. Some might suppose that God's pronouncement that he "loved" Jacob and "hated" Esau shows that he is speaking about their individual eternal destinies, but this is mistaken. In Hebraic thought, when "love" and "hate" are contrasted they usually are meant hyperbolically. The expression simply means to strongly prefer one person or thing over another.

So, for example, when Jesus said, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple" ([Lk 14:26](#)), he was not saying we should literally hate these people. Elsewhere he taught people to love and respect their parents, as the Old Testament also taught ([Mk 10:19](#)). Indeed, he commanded us to love even our enemies ([Mt 5:44](#))! What

Jesus was saying was that he must be preferred above parents, spouses, children, siblings and even life itself. The meaning of Malachi's phrase, then, is simply that God preferred Israel over Edom to be the people he wanted to work with to reach out to the world.

Hence, there is no justification for interpreting **Romans 9** as though it were trying to teach us anything about how God saves or damns individuals.

4. Paul's Summary and Free Will

A fourth argument that demonstrates the error of the deterministic interpretation of **Romans 9** concerns Paul's summary at the end of this chapter. Whenever we are struggling to understand a complex line of reasoning such as we find in **Romans 9**, it is crucial to pay close attention to the author's own summary of his argument, if and when he provides one. By all accounts, **Romans 9** is a difficult, complex and highly disputed passage. Fortunately, Paul provides us with a very clear summary of his argument in this chapter (vss. 30-32). Unfortunately for the deterministic interpretation, it appeals to free will as the decisive factor in determining who "receives mercy" and who gets "hardened."

Paul begins his summary by asking, "What then shall we say" (vs. 30)? If the deterministic interpretation was correct, we would expect Paul to answer by saying something like, "The sovereign God has determined who will be elect and who will not, and no one has the right to question him." As a matter of fact, however, Paul doesn't say anything like this. He rather summarizes his argument by saying:

"Gentiles, who did not strive for righteousness, have attained it, that is, righteousness through faith; but Israel, who did strive for the righteousness that is based on the law, did not succeed in fulfilling that law. Why not? Because they did not strive for it on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works" (vss. 30-32).

This is extremely significant. Paul explains everything he's been talking about throughout **Romans 9** by *appealing to the morally responsible choices of the Israelites and Gentiles*. The one thing God has always looked for in people is faith. The Jews did not "strive" by faith, though they should have (cf. 10:3). They rather chose to trust in their own works. The Gentiles, however, simply believed that God would justify them by faith. This theme recurs throughout chapters 9 through 11. As a nation,

Paul says, the Jews “were broken off *because of their unbelief...*” (11:20, emphasis added). This is why they have been hardened (Rom. 11:7, 25) while the Gentiles, who sought God by faith, have been “grafted in” (11:23).

We see that God’s process of hardening some and having mercy on others is *not arbitrary*: God expresses “severity toward those who have fallen [the nation of Israel] but kindness toward you [believers] provided you continue in his kindness” (11:22). God has mercy on people and hardens people *in response to* their belief or unbelief. And he is willing to change his mind about both the hardening and the mercy, if people change. If Gentiles become arrogant and cease walking by faith alone, they will once again be “cut off.” And if the Jews who are now hardened will not “persist in their unbelief,” God will “graft them in again” (Rom. 11:22-23).

To the Jews who trusted in their national identity and/or external obedience to the law, this hardening seemed arbitrary. Hence Paul chides them by asking, “[W]ho indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, ‘Why have you made me like this?’” (Rom. 9:20). But, as Paul makes abundantly clear throughout Romans 9-11, the hardening was in fact not arbitrary. It was perfectly consistent with the criteria of faith God has always worked with. He gives mercy *in response to faith* and he hardens *in response to unbelief*. It’s not the other way around. People don’t have faith *as a result of* God having mercy on them, and people don’t have unbelief *as a result of* God hardening them.

Yet, to Jews who remained convinced that their national identity and/or good works were the basis of God giving mercy, it now seemed like God was arbitrarily hardening them and arbitrarily extending mercy to the Gentiles.

5. The Flexible Potter and Willing Clay

Fifth, if read in the light of its Old Testament background, Paul’s analogy of a potter working with clay doesn’t imply that the potter unilaterally decides everything, as the deterministic interpretation of Romans 9 suggests. Indeed, in the Old Testament passage that makes the most use of the potter-clay analogy, it has the exact opposite meaning.

In [Jeremiah 18](#) the Lord showed Jeremiah a potter who was working on a vessel that didn't turn out right. So the potter revised his plan and formed a different kind of pot out of it (Jere 18:1-4). In the same way, the Lord said, since he is the potter and Israel is the clay, he has the right and is willing to "change his mind" about his plans for Israel if they will simply repent (Jere. 18:4-11). Indeed, the Lord announced that whenever he's going to judge a nation, he is willing to change his mind if the nation repents. Conversely, whenever God announces that he's going to bless a nation, he will change his mind if that nation turns away from him. In other words, the point of the potter-clay analogy is not God's unilateral control, but *God's willingness and right to change his plans in response to changing hearts*.

The passage fits perfectly with the point Paul is making in [Romans 9](#). While some individual Jews had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, the nation as a whole had rejected Jesus, and thus rejected God's purpose for themselves (cf. [Lk 7:30](#)). Hence, though God had previously blessed Israel, he was now changing his mind about them and was hardening them. Ironically, and shockingly, the Jews were finding themselves in the same position as their old nemesis Pharaoh. He had hardened his heart toward God, so God responded by hardening him further in order to raise him up to further his own sovereign purposes ([Rom 9: 17](#)). So too, Paul was arguing, God was now hardening the Jews in their self-chosen unbelief to further his sovereign purposes. He was going to use their rebellion to do what he had always hoped their obedience would do: namely, bring the non-Jewish world into a relationship with him ([Rom 11:11-12](#)).

Even here, however, the sovereign potter *remains flexible*. If the Jews will abandon their unbelief – clearly God's hardening is not determinative or irrevocable – the potter will once again refashion his plan and graft them in. Conversely, if the Gentiles ever abandon their belief and become prideful – clearly God's mercy is not determinative or irrevocable – the potter will once again refashion his plan for them and cut them off ([Rom 11:12-25](#)).

In any case, we see that the point of the potter analogy is the *opposite* of what the deterministic interpretation would have us believe. Paul's point is that the sovereign potter has the right to revise his plans in response to the clay, which is exactly what God was doing to the nation of Israel. And, however arbitrary his revisions may appear to Jews who trust in

their nationality or good works, they are in fact perfectly wise and just revisions.

This sheds light on why Paul responds to the charge that God is unfair by quoting God as saying, “I will have mercy on whom I have mercy” (9:14, cf. 18). He is not suggesting that God gives mercy or hardens people without any consideration of the choices people make. To the contrary, as has always been the case, the people God chooses to have mercy on are those who have faith, whether they are Jews or Gentiles. And the people God chooses to harden are those who don’t “strive for [righteousness] on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works” (vs. 30–32). But to Jews who insisted that God must choose people based on their nationality or works, God’s right to have mercy on whomever he wishes – even if they have nothing other than faith going for them – needed to be emphasized.

It is also significant to note the original context of the Old Testament quote Paul is giving. The Jews had just turned away from God to worship idols while Moses was receiving the ten commandments on Mt. Sinai – the terms of the covenant God was initiating with them (Ex 32:1-6). God responded by telling Moses he was planning on destroying the Israelites and starting over with Moses alone (Ex 32:9-10). Because of Moses’ intercession, however, the Lord changed his mind and gave those who were willing a chance to repent (Ex 32:14-35). The flexible potter refashioned his plan.

In a tender dialogue between God and Moses that followed this episode, the Lord allowed Moses to behold some of his glory, telling him “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy” (Ex 33:19). The Lord was saying that, to people of faith like Moses, he gives mercy, while to people like the Jews who rebelled – and like Pharaoh – he gives judgment. By choosing to have faith or to rebel against God, individuals decide which they will receive. *They* determine whether God will fashion them into a vessel of mercy or a vessel prepared for destruction (Rom 9:21-23).

This also explains why Paul says that God “endured with much patience” the vessels he was preparing for destruction (Rom. 9: 22). Why would God have to “endure with much patience” rebellious people *if he was the one making them rebellious in the first place?* Why would he go on to say, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people” (10:21, quoting Isa. 65:2) if he was the one molding them to be

disobedient? And why would a God of love intentionally fashion people to rebel against him and bring destruction on themselves in the first place?

In point of fact, the potter endures with much patience the vessels that are being prepared for destruction because it was not his original will to fashion these people in this direction. He would love for all “disobedient and contrary people” to come to him, and so he is patient with them. But so long as they persist in their unbelief, they are clay that can only be fashioned into a vessel fit for destruction.

6. It’s About Wisdom, Not Power

This leads to my sixth and final point. When Paul responds to the charge of injustice by asking, “who... are you, a human being, to argue with God?” (vs. 20), he is not thereby appealing to the sheer power of the potter over the clay. He is rather appealing to the sovereign wisdom of the potter in refashioning clay in a manner that fits the kind of clay he has to work with. When “clay” yields to his influence and has faith, he fashions a vessel of honor. When “clay” becomes “spoiled” (Jere 18:4) and resists his will, he fashions a “vessel of ordinary use” that is being prepared for destruction.

Again, this fashioning looks arbitrary to Jews who believed that they were the “vessel of honor” by virtue of their national identity or good works – Jews who did not “strive for [God’s righteousness] on the basis of faith, but as if it were based on works” (Rom 9:32). It is to these people, expressing this sentiment, that Paul sarcastically asks, “Who are you...?” In truth, God’s fashioning is not arbitrary at all. It is based on whether or not one is willing “to seek” after the righteousness of God that comes by faith, not works (9:30–32; 10:3–5, 12–13; 11:22–23).

Conclusion

On the basis of these six considerations I conclude that the deterministic interpretation of Romans 9 is as misguided as it is unfortunate. It is misguided not only because it misinterprets Paul, but because it fundamentally clashes with the supremacy of God’s self-revelation in Christ. And it is unfortunate because it tragically replaces the unsurpassably glorious picture of God as Jesus Christ dying on the cross for undeserving sinners with a picture of a deity who defies all moral sensibilities by arbitrarily fashioning certain people to be vessels fit for eternal destruction — and then punishing them for being that way. It

exchanges the picture of a beautiful God who reigns supreme with self-sacrificial love and flexible wisdom for a picture of a God who reigns by the arbitrary exercise of sheer power.

I unequivocally affirm that the sovereign God “has mercy on whomever he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whomever he wants to harden.” I would simply add that the “whomever” he has mercy on refers to “all who choose to believe” while the “whomever” he hardens refers to “all who refuse to believe.” The passage demonstrates the wisdom of God’s loving flexibility, not the sheer determinism of God’s power.