

THE CONTENTION

*"As it is written, Jacob have I loved,
but Esau have I hated."*

Romans 9:13

Romans 9:13 is a highly debated passage by what seems to be both sides of a split right down the middle of the Church. Because the divide is on the issue of predestination, this verse is something of enormous controversy.

The Calvinist will say that "Jacob and Esau" depict individuals and that the passage is about individual salvation. Jacob is "loved" by God, so he represents all those who are - throughout history past, present, and future- unconditionally elected or "predestinated" for salvation. Esau is "hated" because he represents all of the reprobates throughout history who God does not love and therefore does not save.

To the Calvinist, the passage teaches individual, unconditional election. But is that what Romans 9 is really about? Although this writing is not meant to be a refutation of Calvinism, when the true meaning of the "Jacob and Esau" quote is made clear, it will at the very least become apparent that Romans 9 cannot be used as a proof text for Calvinism regardless of the validity of the doctrine.

Paul's lament over Israel, his kinsfolk according to the flesh,

should tell us what the purpose of his message is. The contrast between Gentiles and Israel is a dominant theme in Romans though it's important to note the seemingly disproportionate nature of the comparison. Gentiles were getting saved on an *individual* basis and Israel was not being saved on a *national* basis, the very thing that Paul had expected to happen when the Messiah finally arrived.

*"What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. **Why?** Because they did not seek it by **faith**, but as it were, by the works of the **law**. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone"* (Romans 9:30-32).

The reason national Israel was not getting saved is realized by Paul and so he uses it as a warning to both Jews and Gentiles as he preaches the gospel of Christ. He takes his distress over Israel, turns it around and uses it to describe exactly how Gentiles became saved and why most of Israel did not. It's not that there was some list in heaven of who would be saved regardless of whether they were Jew or Gentile. His point is that Jews were following law and Gentiles were having faith. Faith vs. law is the theme and the message. Therefore, a universal, individual, unconditional salvation regardless of ethnicity simply doesn't fit within the context. That alone should be enough for anyone to reject this view of "Jacob and Esau" but what about the fact that God unambiguously states that the twins were "two nations" in Rebecca's womb?

*"And the LORD said to her: "Two **nations** are in your womb, Two peoples shall be separated from your body; One people shall be stronger than the other, And the older shall serve the younger"* (Genesis 25:23).

Clearly, God wants us to know that Jacob and Esau were to become two nations, something that the non-Calvinist *does* acknowledge. In acknowledging that they are in fact nations, the non-Calvinist then must identify them. It's easy to see why they typically say that Jacob is the nation of Israel and Esau is the nation of Edom since the twins are the progenitors of the two nations, respectively. Therefore, Jacob being "loved" by God, means that Israel was chosen to bring forth the Messiah over Edom who God "hated." This is ubiquitously the default interpretation of those who reject Calvinism. But on closer examination, we'll see that this is also inconsistent with Paul's line of reasoning.

The whole point of the text is that national Israel failed to attain what it sought after, not that she brought forth the Messiah, something so obvious it need not be stated. For Paul, Israel was experiencing a loss, not a gain, save for the very small remnant at that time. Quoting Isaiah, Paul tells us that had there not been a remnant, they would have been like Sodom and Gomorrah. That is a big statement. Without a remnant, the whole nation would have been annihilated, undoubtedly referring to the fall of Jerusalem and dispersion of Israel in A.D. 70. Think of Lot who was warned to flee Sodom, and then remember when Jesus told His disciples to flee Jerusalem when they saw armies surrounding her. We all know that Jesus physically came from Israel, however, that is not germane to the context and has no bearing on *who* gets saved and whether they are erroneously adhering to law, or rightly adhering to salvation by grace through faith. In time, we'll see that there is a connection between that contrast of law and grace and the fact that Jacob obtained the blessing and birthright from his older brother, Esau. It is precisely in that transfer from the older to the younger brother where we'll find the meaning and understanding of the text.

Whether you are a Calvinist or a non-Calvinist, you must ask yourself how that transfer from older to younger fits into your view. If “Jacob and Esau” is about individual election unto salvation, as the Calvinist asserts, then that salvation which the “elect” acquire would have to be what the non-elect once had. Have believers taken their inheritance from the “reprobate”? It’s nonsensical to assert that Jacob represents the elect and Esau the reprobate, as Calvinists define the terms, while also denying that there is any kind of transfer since that is precisely what the story of the twins is about.

On the other side of the argument, if “Jacob and Esau” is about Israel being chosen to bring forth the Messiah over Edom, where is the transfer there? Did God first choose Edom to bring forth the Messiah and then later switch it to Israel? Interestingly, one thing that both sides do agree on is that Jacob and Esau are simply representative and a shadow of something outside of themselves. Hopefully, you will soon see that it is not the “elect” and the “reprobate” in one view, nor is it Edom and Israel in the other.

It’s interesting that Calvinists generally don’t say that Ishmael represents the reprobate and Isaac represents the elect, and that non-Calvinists don’t usually say that God chose Isaac over Ishmael to bring forth the Messiah. Both sides are completely missing the connection between the two sets of brothers.

End of Excerpt
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