

ST. PAUL'S ELEVENTH CHAPTER TO
THE ROMANS

ST. PAUL states the problem in all its poignancy: *Hath God cast away His people?* Are the Jews, the chosen ones, no longer the People of God? Paul himself was *an Israelite of the seed of Abraham*; this he could neither forget nor ever wish to repudiate; though he had 'put on Christ,' or rather perhaps because of that very fact, a 'Hebrew of the Hebrews' he would always remain. No one could be more acutely aware than he that the coming to birth of the Christian Church appears a refutation by the facts of all the prophecies and the denial of the divine promises. 'Jehovah had proclaimed himself a hundred times the liberator and saviour of his people: the Messiah was to be first of all the redeemer of the Jews; Sion was designated in advance as the centre of the Messianic theocracy and a bond of union with the unbelieving nations. But now, not only are the gentiles entering the Church without first passing through the Synagogue, but they are almost the only ones who are entering, while the Jews, whose rights seem preponderant, if not exclusive, find themselves shut out from it.'¹

In chapters ix and x St. Paul has been occupied with various aspects of the problem, first vindicating the justice and faithfulness of God (ix), then (x) touching on the concrete human situation which has given rise to it; in chapter xi he shows the providential reason for it and points the way to its solution. After all a partial apostasy of Israel is no new thing; the lives of the prophets bore witness to it. But just as there was a faithful remnant in the days of Elias *that have not bowed their knees to Baal* (v. 4), so is there now a small body of Christian Jews *saved according to the election of grace* (v. 5). These fortunate ones have been made so, not on account of any merits or good works of their own, but by God's special choosing of them. What of the others—those who have refused the call? They have been abandoned, as a direct result of their rejection of divine grace, to *the spirit of insensibility* (v. 8). 'The chosen people have from the beginning shown the same obstinate adherence to their own views and a power of resisting the Holy Ghost; and God had throughout punished them for their obstinacy by giving them over to spiritual blindness.'² St. Stephen's speech at his martyrdom illustrates more in detail the logical assumptions which underlie St.

¹ Prat: *The Theology of St. Paul* (Eng. trns.), Vol. I, p. 250.

² Sanday and Headlam: *Commentary on Romans* (I.C.C.), in loc.

Paul's quotations from the Old Testament. 'You stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Ghost. As your fathers did, so do you also' (*Acts*, vii, 51). In consequence there results the hardening of the heart, often attributed by Scripture to God himself, which not seldom accompanies long continuance in sin. By sinning we withdraw ourselves from the Father's care, receding ever further from the Truth and the Life; the end of the process is destruction, unless it is arrested by a copious outpouring of divine mercy.

So it was to be here. For just as Israel's rejection had not been complete—there was still a 'remnant,' a faithful few—so neither was it to be for ever. But first let us note why the disaster had been permitted at all. God had allowed it—in a sense it was a *felix culpa!*—because He intended to draw from it a more than counterbalancing good, viz., the Messianic salvation of the Gentiles, seeing that they have entered into the inheritance which should have been Israel's. *Salvation to the Gentiles, to move the Jews to jealousy!* A commentator suggests a reflection very relevant to our times. 'In his inspired idea, Gentile Christendom, in Christ, was to be so pure, so beneficent, so happy, finding manifestly in its Messianic Lord such resources for both peace of conscience and a life of noble love, love above all directed towards opponents and traducers, that Israel, looking on, with eyes however purblind with prejudice, should soon see a moral glory in the Church's face impossible to be hid, and be drawn as by a moral magnet to the Church's hope. Is it the fault of God (may he pardon the formal question, if it lacks reverence), or the fault of man, man carrying the Christian name, that facts have been so woefully otherwise in the course of history? It is the fault, the grievous fault, of us Christians.'³

Nevertheless the chosen people with their numbers complete—the *fulness of them* (v. 12)—would one day accept the Messiah. And then how much greater blessings upon the world! Let the Gentiles bear all this in mind. Paul rejoices in being their apostle; he will always do his duty by them; but he cannot forget that he is a Jew with obligations to his own kith and kin; he would stir them to emulation. And his reason for this is that by the return of the Jews the whole world will receive what it longs for. So will the final consummation be brought about, the resurrection of the dead, and the eternal life that follows. The Gentiles have no grounds for supposing that God's purpose has been in any way changed. Despite the abolition of the Law, despite the partial rejection of Israel, 'Les Juifs

³ Moule: *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*, pp. 296-7.

sont toujours, d'une certaine manière, un peuple consacré à Dieu, un peuple dû à Dieu.⁴ Israel is a holy race : just as a piece of dough taken from the kneading trough and offered to God consecrates the whole mass, and just as healthy roots give life and nourishment to the tree, so have God's people been sanctified in their forefathers. ' The plentiful olive tree, fair, fruitful and beautiful,⁵ whose roots are the Patriarchs, still abides, though many of its branches—Israelites who by birth and descent were members of the Church—have been broken off. Into their place the Gentiles, shoots from the wild olive, have been grafted; but by a process which leaves no room for self-congratulation. They have nothing to boast of against the Jews; for, equally with the old branches which still remain on the tree, they draw the rich sap which flows from the root of the original cultivated stock.

True, the Israelites were rejected because of unbelief and the newcomers owe their position to faith; but for that very reason they can lay no claim to natural superiority. Wherefore *Be not high minded, but fear* (v. 20). If God spared not the natural branches, why assume that he will spare those ingrafted in a manner contrary to nature? Let there be no self-confidence, lest the new meet with the same fate as the old. Moreover, the fallen branches can be grafted in again to the original cultivated olive; which would in fact be more natural than the ingrafting of branches from a tree that is quite wild. The Jews, in other words, have, from this point of view, closer affinities with the Israel of God than the Gentiles.

Now (v. 25) St. Paul discloses the *mystery* into which he, above all the other apostles, has been given insight. This is the great redemptive scheme whereby Jews and Gentiles alike are to be included in the Messianic Kingdom. Moreover—and most consolingly for the Jews—the hardening of the heart which has come upon so many will pass away; their blindness will last only until the full complement of the Gentiles has submitted to Christ. When this has come about then the whole people of Israel shall be saved. *All Israel* (v. 26) has been interpreted figuratively, as applying to the Church, or, as by Calvin, to the 'spiritual Israel'; but the most likely meaning is the literal one, that Israel as a whole, Israel as a nation (though not necessarily every individual Israelite), will be saved. St. Paul is looking forward in prophetic vision to a time when the whole earth, including the kingdoms of the Gentiles and the people of Israel, shall be united in the Church of God.

⁴ M.-J. Lagrange: *Épître aux Romains*, in loc.

⁵ *Jeremiah*, xi, 16.

All this was to be made possible by an outpouring of divine forgiveness. So Isaiah (lix, 20) had described the expected Redeemer as one who should come forth from Jerusalem and take away sin from the the descendants of Jacob, and purify Israel. Thus would God's covenant with his people be fulfilled: by the exercise of the divine prerogative of pardon; and the fact that Israel now so much needs forgiveness is but a stronger reason for confidence in the truth of the prophecy. In respect of the rejection of Christ's gospel the Jews are admittedly at feud with God—a state of things which has been providentially countenanced for the sake of the Gentiles; but this cannot invalidate the truth that, from the point of view of God's election (which is the ultimate point of view!), they are still, in virtue of their ancestry, His chosen people. *For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance* (v. 29).

The Gentiles should remember that there was a time when they too were unbelievers; their present obedience to the faith is proof that they have profited by the unbelief of the Jews, in that God's mercy has been shown them. But if it is now Israel's turn to be disobedient, this suggests that they in their turn will receive the same mercy as the Gentiles. Gentile and Jew, as history testifies, have alike apostatised from God's law (cf. St. Paul's indictment of the Gentiles in the first chapter of the epistle); they stand equally in need of his mercy. Indeed God's providence has been at work for the precise purpose of bringing home to both parties a recognition of this need; for true conversion of heart is only possible when man's self-sufficiency has been broken down and his reliance upon himself utterly shattered; then he may experience that 'creative despair' which thrusts him into the arms of God. So had He, as it were, locked up all mankind, first Gentiles and then Jews, in the prison-house of unbelief, that He may be able at last to show His mercy on all. Let no further explanation of God's beneficent, though deeply mysterious, dealings with man in this regard be asked for; rather let us be content to praise and marvel at the unsearchable treasures of His wisdom. *O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and of the knowledge of God!* . . . (vv. 33-36).

The message of *Romans* xi offers much food for thought to those concerned with the betterment of the modern world. The length and fulness of the argument make it hard to resist the impression that St. Paul had difficulty in bringing the Gentiles to think aright of the chosen people in their fall and rebellion. Is it fanciful to see here the first refutation of Christian anti-semitism, and an inspired one at that? At any rate, it is an annihilating critique. Not only are Jewish and Gentile Christian on an equal footing of common brother-

hood—‘ There is neither Jew nor Greek : there is neither bond nor free ; there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus ’⁶ ; but we have to look upon the non-Christian Jews as members of a holy race, people destined for salvation. If the average Gentile had little to boast of at the beginning of the Christian era in comparison with his Jewish contemporary, how much less has he to-day. The Jews who have been in agony all over Europe, who have their detractors even in England, are unlikely to forget that they suffered at the hands of many who claimed the Christian name. The ‘ problem ’ of the Jews remains, too complex to admit of any ready-made solution—even by the Pauline theology. In any approach to it we have to beware, as Reinhold Niebuhr (himself much exercised over the Jewish question) has pointed out, of the tendency of the mind ‘ to take premature flights into the absolute or the universal from the tragic conflicts and the stubborn particularities of human history.’ Nevertheless the eternal verities of the Christian revelation cannot be gainsaid. We have the duty, in our own measure, of hastening the day when ‘ there is neither Gentile nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision; Barbarian nor Scythian, bond nor free. But Christ is all in all.’⁷

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⁶ *Galatians*, III, 28.

⁷ *Colossians*, III, 11.