CHAPTER TWO

“IF THE LORD OF HOSTS HAD NOT LEFT US SEED . . .”
ISAIAH IN ROMANS 9:1–29

It is not as though the word of God has fallen.

Romans 9:6

In Romans 9–11, scriptural testimonies entwine with Paul’s own interpretive comments to create a majestic tapestry displaying the righteousness of the God of Israel.¹ My purpose in this and the following two chapters is to illuminate the artistry with which Paul interweaves explicit and allusive references to Isaiah into this thick web of scripture and interpretation. This will require a close reading of Romans 9–11 as a whole, with careful attention not only to Paul’s invocations of Isaiah, but also to the apostle’s appeals to other scriptural witnesses, for Paul frequently employs Isaiah as part of a larger exegetical argument comprising a number of different texts. Indeed, I will argue that Paul’s reading of Isaiah cannot be fully understood apart from his interpretation of key texts from the Torah, Psalms, and other prophetic books.

The dense and multi-layered texture of the argument in Romans 9–11 suggests that, long before dictating this particular letter, the apostle has reflected deeply on the issues he treats here.² Although it is occasionally proposed that Paul himself is surprised by the turn he takes in chapter 11,³ I hope to show convincingly that in Romans

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³ The extreme view is represented by B. Noack, who argues: “The paragraphs from ix.1 to xi.10 do not contain the slightest hint at the final solution, simply because that solution does not yet exist” (1965:166). Rather, “the solution is granted Paul during his wrestling with the problem, the mystery is revealed to him at the
9–10, Paul is already preparing the way for the eloquent encomium on God’s mercy that brings his argument to a close in Romans 11. Thus, while my discussion follows the thread of Paul’s argument through Romans 9–11, I will often pause to step back and consider the larger design of the tapestry Paul is in the process of weaving.

The problems Paul addresses in Romans 9–11 are adumbrated much earlier in the letter. In the thematic statement of Romans, Paul asserts that his gospel is

the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes—for the Jew first, and equally for the Greek—for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith... (Rom 1:16–17).

In this compact sentence, Paul asserts that the “righteousness of God”—that is, God’s faithfulness to rescue his covenant people Israel and to vindicate them before their oppressors—is revealed in what God has now accomplished in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The promises of redemption and restoration for Israel are at long last being realized. Moreover, the benefits of Israel’s redemption are available to Jew and Gentile alike on precisely the same basis. Paul unpacks the significance of these claims in the chapters that follow.


4 For Romans 9–11 as central to (though not necessarily the center of) the theological argument of the letter, see among recent commentators, Wright 1991:234; Beker 1986; W. S. Campbell 1982; Hooker 1990:3; Dunn 1988b:519. The tendency to see Romans 9–11 as integral to the letter is a welcome corrective to the long-dominant interpretation that marginalized these chapters (for a concise history of interpretation, see Beker 1980:63–64; a more extensive survey is found in E. E. Johnson, 1989:110–23). At the same time, there is no reason to lurch to the opposite extreme and conclude that chapters 1–8 are merely a “preface” to 9–11 (as does Stendahl 1976:29; see the critique of Stendahl by E. P. Sanders 1978).

5 This definition of “God’s righteousness” in Paul (and in Isaiah) will be supported by the detailed exegetical arguments of the present study. It is by no means, however, a novel definition of the phrase. For a similar understanding of “the righteousness of God” in Paul, see Williams 1980; Beker 1986:14–15; Dunn 1998:334–46; Hays 1992; E. P. Sanders 1977:491–92; Kuyper 1977; Dahl 1977c; Käsemann 1969, 1971; Stuhlmacher 1965; Kertelge 1971; Dodd 1932:9–13. The most thorough investigation of “righteousness” language in Isaiah LXX is that of J. W. Olley (1979); see also Fiedler 1970. For a critique of Olley’s study, see pp. 103–104 n. 192.

6 E. P. Sanders forcefully draws attention to the crucial role the inclusion of Gentiles qua Gentiles plays in the construction of Paul’s thought. He argues that