

# Vessels of Wrath and God's Pathos: Potter/Clay Imagery in Rom 9:20–23

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## ■ Abstract

Starting from the concept of divine patience in Rom 9:22, this article argues that Paul employs the potter/clay metaphor not (as often interpreted) to defend God's right to arbitrary choice but rather as an appeal to what Abraham Heschel called divine pathos—the idea that God's choices are impacted by human actions. The potter/clay imagery in Rom 9:20–23 thus serves to highlight the dynamic and improvisational way the God of Israel interacts with Israel and, by extension, all of creation.

## ■ Keywords

potter, clay, apostle Paul, sovereignty, predestination, theodicy

## ■ Introduction

After spending the first eight chapters of Romans arguing that the uncircumcised are receiving the righteousness promised to Israel through the indwelling holy spirit, Paul begins Rom 9 at pains to explain how this surprising development does not ultimately undermine the promises to Israel but paradoxically and surprisingly represents God's continued faithfulness to Israel—and, by extension, the power and fidelity of Israel's God. This new section begins with the argument that God's promises have never applied to all the descendants of the patriarchs; just as not all Abraham's descendants in the past have inherited the Abrahamic promises, so

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HTR 115:2 (2022) 197–218

also not all who are descended from Israel will receive the promises (9:6–13).<sup>1</sup> But Paul recognizes that this does little to quell the potential charge of divine injustice, asking: “What then? There is no injustice (ἀδικία) with God, is there?” to which he replies, μὴ γένοιτο! (9:14). Citing Exod 33:19, Paul explains that God has a right to show mercy to whomever he chooses<sup>2</sup>—by implication not solely to those descended from Abraham (9:15–16)—while “hardening” (σκληρύνω) the others as he did Pharaoh in the Exodus (9:17–18).<sup>3</sup>

Such an appeal to God’s choice, however, raises the even thornier problem of portraying God as arbitrary and capricious, and Paul anticipates the objection: “Why does he still find fault? For who has resisted his will?” (Rom 9:19).<sup>4</sup> To address this question, Paul turns to a traditional analogy comparing God’s interaction with humanity to that of a potter working with clay (9:20–24). Remarkably, Paul’s use of the potter/clay analogy has frequently been read not as a *rebuttal* of the implied accusation that God is capricious and therefore unjust but rather as a *defense* of God’s sovereign right to arbitrary choice.<sup>5</sup> That is, just as a potter has the right to make vessels specifically to be smashed to demonstrate his sovereignty and power, God has a right to define justice however he chooses. Nils Dahl, for example, asserts: “Paul’s reply does not even attempt a rational explanation. It simply recalls that God is God and man is a sinner who has no right to make complaints against his creator.”<sup>6</sup> The ubiquity of this interpretation is reflected in most popular English translations of verse 22 (see Table 1).

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan A. Linebaugh, *God, Grace, and Righteousness in Wisdom of Solomon and Paul’s Letter to the Romans* (NovTSup 152; Leiden: Brill, 2013) 182–89, argues that the argument of Rom 9:6–18 undermines the reasons for election established in Wisdom of Solomon, particularly in that, for Paul, “divine mercy is scripturally defined in the event *Wisdom* deletes from Israel’s history—namely, the Golden Calf debacle” (186–87).

<sup>2</sup> J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul in Concert in the Letter to the Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) 53, notes that the allusion to Exod 34:6–7 here invokes the golden calf episode to which Paul has already alluded in Rom 9, emphasizing God’s mercy to Israel despite disobedience (50–52). This allusion is further strengthened by the echo of the intercession of Moses for Israel (Exod 32:32) in Rom 9:3, which both rhetorically puts Paul in the position of Moses and reminds the reader that YHWH has previously threatened to destroy all of Israel except one descendant, through whom the promises would still be fulfilled. See Scott W. Hahn, “‘All Israel Will Be Saved’: The Restoration of the Twelve Tribes in Romans 9–11,” *Letter & Spirit: A Journal of Catholic Biblical Theology* 10 (2015) 63–104, esp. 89–90.

<sup>3</sup> Note also the allusion to Tob 4:19 in Rom 9:18 as pointed out by Alexander A. Di Lella, “Tobit 4,19 and Romans 9,18: An Intertextual Study,” *Bib* 90 (2009) 260–63.

<sup>4</sup> These questions echo Job’s protests (LXX Job 33:9–10; 9:19; 41:3 and Wis 11:21; 12:12), though as will be shown below, the subtle change from the future tense found in the echoed material to the perfect tense here is significant.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9:1–23* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007) 193–202; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (AB 44; New York: Doubleday, 1993) 564–66; Linebaugh, *God, Grace, and Righteousness*, 188–89.

<sup>6</sup> Nils A. Dahl, “The Future of Israel,” in *Studies in Paul: Theology for the Early Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002) 137–58, at 144.

Table 1: Rom 9:22

NA28	NRSV	ESV	NIV
εἰ δὲ θέλων ὁ θεὸς ἐνδεΐξασθαι τὴν ὄργην καὶ γνωρίσαι τὸ δυνατόν αὐτοῦ ἤνεγκεν ἐν πολλῇ μακροθυμίᾳ σκεῦῃ ὀργῆς κατηρητισμένα εἰς ἀπόλειαν.	What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, <u>has endured with much patience the objects of wrath that are made for destruction;</u>	What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, <u>has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,</u>	What if God, although choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, <u>bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction?</u>
LB 2017	EÜ	RVC	NBS
Da Gott seinen Zorn erzeigen und seine Macht kundtun wollte, <u>hat er mit großer Geduld ertragen die GefäÙe des Zorns, die zum Verderben bestimmt waren</u>	Wie aber, wen Gott in der Absicht, seinen Zorn zu zeigen und seine Macht zu erweisen, <u>die zur Vernichtung bereiteten GefäÙe des des Zorns mit großer Langmut ertragen hat,</u>	¿Y qué, si Dios, queriendo mostrar su ira y dar a conocer su poder, <u>soportó con mucha paciencia a los vasos de ira preparados para destrucción?</u>	Et si Dieu, voulant montrer sa colère et faire connaître son pouvoir, <u>a supporté avec une grande patience des objets de colère formés pour la perdition,</u>

The end of this verse is especially noteworthy, as each of these translations makes specific interpretive choices suggesting that God’s choices are predetermined and arbitrary. The NRSV, for example, renders σκεῦῃ not as “vessels” or “instruments” but as “objects” specifically “made for destruction.” For its part, although rendering σκεῦῃ with “vessels,” the ESV translates κατηρητισμένα with the more predestinarian language of “prepared,” resulting in “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction.” The NIV doubles down on the ESV’s approach, employing *both* “objects” and “prepared,” thereby removing all doubt about the predestinarian nature of Paul’s argument. The same predestinarian sense also appears in the popular German (*ertragen . . . bestimmt waren; bereiteten . . . ertragen hat*), Spanish (*soportó . . . preparados*), and French (*a supporté . . . formés*) versions listed in Table 1. The gist of the potter/clay analogy as rendered in all seven translations—and as widely interpreted in modern scholarship—is simple: God has indeed arbitrarily predestined some people for destruction, but this is not unjust, because it is God’s sovereign right to do so.<sup>7</sup>

This reading, however, runs counter to the understanding of God’s justice in other early Jewish material, where the opposite of justice is not mercy but arbitrariness or partiality.<sup>8</sup> That is, in contrast to the notoriously capricious deities familiar

<sup>7</sup> “The only explanation is the inexplicable freedom of God” (Linebaugh, *God, Grace, and Righteousness*, 189).

<sup>8</sup> “The opposite of saying that God is *just* and rewards and punishes would *not* be to say that he is *merciful* but to say that he is *arbitrary* and capricious” (E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977] 127; cf. the fuller discussion of this theme in early Judaism on 126–28, 182, 234). In keeping with this early Jewish perspective, Paul highlights and defends God’s justice and impartiality throughout Romans,

throughout the ancient Mediterranean, YHWH's judgment is not arbitrary but impartial, based on each person's behavior.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, many interpreters have noted a disconnect between this passage's apparent defense of God's arbitrary choice and the arguments about God's justice and impartiality throughout the rest of Romans, particularly in Rom 2.<sup>10</sup> Reinhard Feldmeier, for example, asks, "How can the God whose devotion and fidelity are so consistently unfolded in Romans 1–8, be reconciled with the arbitrary potter?"<sup>11</sup> Others have complained about the inadequacy of the analogy itself, suggesting, for example, that the analogy of the potter is not naturally suited for "the dissimilar area of human responsibility."<sup>12</sup> I contend, however, that such complaints about this passage are the result of reading Paul's appeal to the potter/clay analogy in Rom 9:20–24 backwards, as interpreters have misunderstood the implications of clay as an analogy, the emphasis Paul places on the patience of the divine potter, and the passage's function in its larger context.

To make this case, the first half of this article engages in a close grammatical and lexical analysis of 9:22b, arguing that rather than depicting God as enduring objects arbitrarily destined for damnation, this verse emphasizes God's patience while responsively forming instruments for different purposes. The second half of the article builds on this foundation by reexamining the analogy in its larger context, first showing that given the nature of clay and the function of the potter analogy in Jeremiah and Isaiah, a reader should expect the metaphor to signal an appeal to divine pathos rather than an argument for the immutability or irresistibility of the divine plan. The article concludes by assessing the analogy's function in the historical argument Paul is making about God's dealings with Israel, arguing that the apostle employs this analogy not to *defend* God's right to arbitrary choice but rather to *rebut* the idea that God's choices are capricious or arbitrary.

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particularly in Rom 2. See Jouette M. Bassler, *Divine Impartiality: Paul and a Theological Axiom* (SBLDS 59; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982); eadem, "Divine Impartiality in Paul's Letter to the Romans," *NovT* (1984) 43–58; George P. Carras, "Romans 2, 1–29: A Dialogue on Jewish Ideals," *Bib* (1992) 183–207.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets* (Perennial Classics; San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001) 254, 299–317.

<sup>10</sup> See Bassler, *Divine Impartiality*; idem, "Divine Impartiality"; Carras, "Romans 2, 1–29," 183–207.

<sup>11</sup> Reinhard Feldmeier, "Vater und Töpfer? Zur Identität Gottes im Römerbrief," in *Between Gospel and Election: Explorations in the Interpretation of Romans 9–11* (ed. Florian Wilk, J. Ross Wagner, and Frank Schleritt; WUNT 257; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010) 377–90, at 388, continuing: "Why does Paul then write Rom 9 as he does, as a text that has provided the crucial *dicta probantia* for the doctrine of the *gemina praedestinatio*, and therefore also for the predestination to damnation?" (my translations).

<sup>12</sup> Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Hermeneia 66; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007) 596. See also Herbert Morrison Gale, *The Use of Analogy in the Letters of Paul* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 198–205; James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16* (WBC 38B; Nashville: Nelson, 1988) 559.

## ■ Reexamining the Potter at Work

The passage itself is highly allusive in both theme and vocabulary, connecting closely with key sections of Rom 1–8 and other early Jewish literature. Beverly Gaventa, for example, has noted that 9:19–23 has strong thematic and vocabulary connections to Rom 1:18–32, which has already made the points “that God has the prerogative to do what God wills, and that humanity is not entitled to question God’s designs,” and that “humanity has put in God’s place things that are not God.”<sup>13</sup> The theme of God’s impartiality in Rom 2 also stands in the background of the question in verse 19, and the vocative address ὁ ἄνθρωπος in the reply echoes Rom 2:1, while the “vocabulary of wrath and power and patience and glory” calls back not only to 1:18–32 but also to 2:4–11.<sup>14</sup> The rebuke of Rom 9:20 evokes numerous potter-clay analogies in biblical and other early Jewish literature,<sup>15</sup> especially recalling Isa 29:16/45:9, Job 9:12/33:13, and Dan 4:35,<sup>16</sup> and the image of a potter making different kinds of vessels from the same clay (9:21) borrows heavily from Wis 15:7–8.<sup>17</sup>

The primary interpretive difficulties arise in verses 22–23, as the grammar and vocabulary of these verses are troublesome. The grammatical construction of these verses is, as Paul William Meyer succinctly summarizes, “severely elliptical,”<sup>18</sup> and at least three solutions have been offered.<sup>19</sup> All three grammatical solutions,

<sup>13</sup> Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “On the Calling-into-Being of Israel: Romans 9:6–29,” in *Between Gospel and Election* (ed. Wilk, Wagner, and Schleritt) 255–70, at 265.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> These verses appear to draw upon at least Hos 8:8, 13:15; Wis 15:7–8; Isa 8:5, 10:5, 29:16, 45:9; Jer 18:1–11, 50:25 (27:25 LXX); Job 9:12, 33:13; Dan 4:35; Sir 27:4; Ps 2:7–10; 31:12 (30:13 LXX). See Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 65. J. Ross Wagner, “‘Who Has Believed Our Message?’: Paul and Isaiah ‘In Concert’ in the Letter to the Romans” (PhD diss., Duke University, 1999) 81–87, notes that the targumim link Isa 29:16, Isa 45:9, and Jer 18:6b, suggesting that these three passages were traditionally “read in light of one another” and that “a similar interpretative move appears to lie behind Paul’s allusion to the potter-clay metaphor in Romans 9” (82). Wagner further notes that “the metaphor had currency outside written texts, as part of Paul’s larger cultural heritage (70 n. 88).

<sup>16</sup> See especially Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News*, 58–71; *idem*, “Who Has Believed,” 81–87.

<sup>17</sup> E.g., Wagner, “Who Has Believed,” 84–87. Piper, *The Justification of God*, 176, argues that Sir 33:13 is a more suitable source for the image in Rom 9:21 because the latter lacks the context of the critique of idolatry found in Wis 15, but it is unclear why the presence of echoes of one would preclude the other. As Jewett, *Romans*, 594, notes, Wis 15:7 contains “five key terms or ideas” that recur in Rom 9:21, while Sir 33:13 shares three of those five.

<sup>18</sup> Paul William Meyer, *The Word in This World: Essays in New Testament Exegesis and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 197.

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion of the grammar in these verses, see Günther Bornkamm, “Paulinische Anakoluthe im Römerbrief,” in *Das Ende des Gesetzes. Paulusstudien* (ed. Günther Bornkamm; Munich: Kaiser, 1952) 76–92, at 90–92; Charles E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols.; ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979) 492–98; Jewett, *Romans*, 595; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 604; Folker Siegert, *Argumentation bei Paulus, gezeigt an Röm 9–11* (WUNT 34; Tübingen: Mohr, 1985) 132–33; Gaventa, “Calling-into-Being,” 265–66.

however, arrive at essentially the same meaning, so the more significant questions concern how to construe the two clauses of 22b, chiefly the words ἤνεγκεν and κατηρτισμένα.

### ■ Produced, Not Endured

The phrase ἤνεγκεν ἐν πολλῇ μακροθυμίᾳ σκευὴ ὀργῆς has proven especially difficult, partly because Paul nowhere else uses the verb φέρειν.<sup>20</sup> As seen in the translations above, ἤνεγκεν is typically rendered as “endured” or the synonym “bore,” a decision apparently influenced by the nearby μακροθυμίᾳ, as translators and interpreters try to make sense of the concept of patience in the passage, resulting in “endured/bore with much patience.” But the idea of “enduring” pottery makes little sense—it is unclear what it would mean to “endure” a clay vessel. Such a reading is even more problematic in the context of Paul’s larger argument, as highlighted by John Battle’s complaint:

[I]t is difficult to account for the expression Paul uses: God *bears with much longsuffering* unbelieving Jews, who are fitted for destruction. How does this patience toward the Jews display God’s wrath or power? Would it not be better to say: he *judges, punishes, or oppresses* vessels of wrath?<sup>21</sup>

Μὴ γένοιτο! On the contrary, rather than deriving the sense of ἤνεγκεν from the nearby μακροθυμίᾳ, it helps to recognize that Paul has lifted this phrase—including the verb he nowhere else uses—from Jer 27:25 LXX (MT 50:25), in which God brings out his instruments of wrath with which he will destroy the land of the Chaldeans.<sup>22</sup> The language here is as close to a direct quotation of scripture as appears in 9:19–24 (see Table 2).

<sup>20</sup> Gaventa, “Calling-into-Being,” 267 n. 46.

<sup>21</sup> John A. Battle, Jr., “Paul’s Use of the Old Testament in Romans 9:25–26,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (1981) 115–29, at 126 [italics in original].

<sup>22</sup> A similar reference to σκευὴ ὀργῆς αὐτοῦ appears in Codex Marchalianus and Symmachus’s version of Isa 13:5 (though most LXX MSS have οἱ ὀπλομάχοι αὐτοῦ), referring to the instruments of the Lord’s wrath, which he will summon “from a far country” and with which he will destroy the whole land of Babylon (not, as in Johannes Munck, *Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9–11* [trans. Ingeborg Nixon; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967] 67, “the whole earth”). Anthony T. Hanson, “Vessels of Wrath or Instruments of Wrath? Romans ix. 22–3,” *JTS* 32 (1981) 433–43 (434–35), points out that the evidence from the targumim suggests Isa 13:5 and Jer 50:25 (MT) were connected in the tradition. Note also the intriguing interpretation in a later rabbinic text reflecting on the merciful purpose of God in scattering Israel: “Of course the owner knows where he put his instruments; when he returns to his house, he will restore the instruments to his house” (Seder Eliyahu Rabbah 10). See Isaiah Gafni, *Land, Center and Diaspora: Jewish Constructs in Late Antiquity* (JSPSup 21; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997) 32; translation based on text in *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah ve-Seder Eliyahu Zuta (Tana de-ve Eliyahu)* (ed. Meir Friedman; Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1969) 54.

Table 2: Jer 27:25 LXX and Rom 9:22

Jer 27:25 LXX (50:25 MT)	Rom 9:22
κύριος ... ἐξήνεγκεν τὰ σκευὴ ὀργῆς αὐτοῦ	ὁ θεὸς ... ἤνεγκεν ... σκευὴ ὀργῆς

Recognizing this intertextual reference opens at least two interpretive options. The first is to understand ἤνεγκεν as “carrying” or “conveying” the vessels, thus conforming closely to the sense in the source passage in Jeremiah. But Paul has altered Jeremiah’s “bring out” by removing the prefix ἐξ from the verb, which brings into play another meaning of φέρω more suited to the context of the creation of clay vessels, namely, “to produce” or “form,” a common meaning for the verb in a range of contexts.<sup>23</sup>

Understanding ἤνεγκεν ἐν πολλῇ μακροθυμίᾳ as “produced with much patience” is certainly more coherent within the context of the metaphor,<sup>24</sup> as the potter is not idly awaiting a change in the clay but actively—and patiently—involved. That the question that spurs the analogy so strongly echoes Wis 12:12 (“For who will say, ‘What have you done?’ or who will resist your judgment?”) further reinforces such a reading, as the surrounding context in Wis 12 emphasizes that God delayed his judgments to give the Canaanites space for repentance (esp. 12:9–11, 15–21).<sup>25</sup> Even more significantly, this reading coheres with Paul’s own arguments about God’s justice elsewhere in the letter, particularly his explanation in Rom 2:4 that God’s μακροθυμία (and χρηστός) is intended to lead to repentance.

### ■ Objects or Instruments?

Significantly, the “vessels of wrath” in Jer 27:25 LXX are not objects of God’s wrath but rather instruments used for dispensing God’s wrath. A similar instrumental sense—in which these σκευὴ ὀργῆς still serve a function in God’s redemptive plan—also fits well in the immediate context of Paul’s analogy,<sup>26</sup> particularly since

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Philo, *Opif.* 78, 167; *Leg.* 2.95 (referring to the bearing of children); 3.30 (τὰ ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ πάντα φέρεται χωρὶς ἡγεμόνος; “everything in the cosmos is produced without governor”); *Mos.* 2.62 (γῆ τὰ ἀμύθητα εἶδη καὶ πρότερον ἤνεγκε; “earth also previously produced innumerable species [of animals]”); Plato, *Tim.* 24d (producing living beings); Mk 4:8; Jn 12:24, 15:2; T. Naph 2:2. Cf. also *LSJ*, s.v. “φέρειν,” 112, V and IV.3; BDAG, s.v. “φέρειν,” 1051–52 #10, though the latter is mistaken in limiting the “produced” meaning solely to the context “of a plant and its fruits,” as evident from the examples listed above.

<sup>24</sup> Pace Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (5th ed.; Meyers Kritisch-Exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1978) 315 n. 22, who asserts, “There is a particular tone on the verb ἔνεγκεν (V 22): this ‘carrying’ (bearing) of God is an expression of divine longsuffering, which Paul praises in a special way (πολλῇ therefore stands out). The old context (Jer 27:25: ἐξένεγκεν τὰ σκευὴ ὀργῆς) does not belong here.”

<sup>25</sup> B. J. Oropeza, “Paul and Theodicy: Intertextual Thoughts on God’s Justice and Faithfulness to Israel in Romans 9–11,” *NTS* 53 (2007) 57–80, at 70.

<sup>26</sup> Munck, *Christ and Israel*, 67–68. Cf. also Hanson, “Vessels of Wrath,” and Gaventa, “Calling-into-Being,” 266, each of whom also prefer the instrumental reading. It is, however, unnecessary to render σκευὴ as “weapons,” as does Munck. Rather, “vessels,” “utensils,” or “instruments” seems best in the context of the potter/clay metaphor.

the immediately preceding verse explicitly depicts a potter making different kinds of vessels for distinct functions, whether honorable or dishonorable.<sup>27</sup> Remarkably, the verbal parallel to Jer 27:25 LXX has typically been dismissed as “interesting but of doubtful relevance here,”<sup>28</sup> as interpreters have nevertheless insisted that Paul’s vessels of wrath should be understood as *objects* of God’s wrath. For example, although James Dunn recognizes that in verse 21, “the more natural sense of the metaphor is of vessels put to differing uses within history,”<sup>29</sup> he immediately drops this instrumental reading of the vessels in the next verse, concluding:

The genitive construction of σκεῦη ὀργῆς allows various senses—vessels made in anger or made to experience eschatological wrath. But since the following phrase has more clearly in view final destruction and its cause, σκεῦη ὀργῆς here is probably intended in the sense “vessels which are objects of God’s wrath now.”<sup>30</sup>

Charles Cranfield likewise suggests that “σκεῦος . . . is used in vv. 22 and 23 . . . without any special thought of the literal use of the word in v. 21,” which seems implausible given the grammatical (δέ) and thematic connections between the two verses.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, despite acknowledging that “‘Of wrath’ is certainly a genitive of quality, ‘vessels characterized by wrath,’” Battle asserts that “in Paul’s context the thought predominates that these vessels will *receive* God’s wrath, just as the ‘vessels of mercy’ will receive his mercy.”<sup>32</sup>

On the contrary, just as no English speaker requesting a “vessel of water” would mean “a vessel which is the object of water now,” nonpossessive instances of the σκεῦος + genitive construction typically refer either to the function performed by the σκεῦος in question (e.g., to carry water or employ in battle) or the material from which it is made. That is, a “σκεῦος of something” is a vessel or instrument comprised of, filled with, conveying, or for the purpose of something but is not the object on which that thing works. Indeed, I have yet to find an example outside this passage of such an objective sense of the σκεῦος + genitive construction (that is, “a σκεῦος which is the object of X”), while examples of the instrumental sense

<sup>27</sup> See in Jacob Thiessen, *Gott hat Israel nicht verstoßen. Biblisch-exegetische und theologische Perspektiven in der Verhältnisbestimmung von Israel, Judentum und Gemeinde Jesu* (Edition Israelogie; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2010) 52: “It can, however, be assumed that the term in Rom 9:22f. is not seen independently from the use in Rom 9:21.” Cf. also Christian Müller, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit und Gottes Volk. Eine Untersuchung zu Römer 9–11* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1964) 27; Gaventa, “Calling-into-Being,” 266.

<sup>28</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 559.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 557.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 559. Similarly, Simon Légasse, *L’épître de Paul aux Romains* (LD 10; Paris: Cerf, 2002) 609–10: “promis qu’ils [vessels] sont au châtement divin” (609). Cf. also Elisée Ouoba, “Paul’s Use of Isaiah 27:9 and 59:20–21 in Romans 11:25–27” (PhD diss., Wheaton College, 2010) 177; Jewett, *Romans*, 596–97; Moo, *Romans*, 609; Ernst Käsemann, *A Commentary on Romans* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 270; Michel, *Römer*, 313–15.

<sup>31</sup> Cranfield, *Romans*, 495 n. 4.

<sup>32</sup> Battle, “Paul’s Use,” 127; Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 569–70.



abound.<sup>33</sup> On this point, I suspect that some interpreters have been led astray by the verbal quality of ὀργῆς, thereby interpreting the phrase as though it were an objective genitive even when categorizing it as a genitive of quality.<sup>34</sup> But an objective genitive requires that the head noun include or imply a verbal idea; a verbal noun in the genitive is irrelevant.<sup>35</sup> Since the head noun here (σκεύη) is not a verbal noun, this genitive should therefore be understood as attributive rather than verbal.<sup>36</sup> The instrumental sense also corresponds with the earlier admonition in Romans to present the body's members not as ὄπλα ἀδικίας but as ὄπλα δικαιοσύνης (6:13), phrases universally understood as instrumental.<sup>37</sup> Elsewhere, Paul presents himself and his coworkers as “clay vessels” (ὄστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν) containing “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (2 Cor 4:6–7), similarly employing σκεύη to refer to a functional instrument used by God.<sup>38</sup> Given the grammar, scriptural undertones of the phrase, and Paul's use of σκευός elsewhere, σκεύη ὀργῆς would be an odd choice to represent objects for God's wrath in this passage.

Moreover, the metaphor itself depends on the potter having a reasonable function in mind for the vessels being formed. As George Caird explained decades ago, “A vessel may in the end have to be discarded, but the potter does not make vessels for the ghoulish delight of hurling them against a wall,”<sup>39</sup> let alone to demonstrate his power over them—nor could an ancient potter have afforded to do so.<sup>40</sup> An instrumental reading of σκεύη ὀργῆς also better sets up Paul's concluding arguments about interdependent redemption in Rom 11, namely, that God has used Israel's unfaithfulness to bring about the salvation of both Israel and the nations.<sup>41</sup> As such,

<sup>33</sup> E.g., 1 Sam 8:12 (“vessels for his chariots”); 1 Kgs 10:21 (“vessels for drinking”); Ps 7:14 (“vessels of death” = “deadly weapons”); Eccl 9:18 (“weapons of war”); Sir 45:8 (“instruments of might”); Ezek 9:1 (“weapons of destruction”); Heb 9:21 (“vessels of the [temple] service”); Barn. 7:3, 11:9 (“vessel of his spirit”); Asen. 10:14 (“wine vessels”).

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 570.

<sup>35</sup> See Hubert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1920) §1328–§1335; see also the discussion in Denny Burk, “The Righteousness of God (Dikaioσunē Theou) and Verbal Genitives: A Grammatical Clarification,” *JSNT* 34 (2012) 346–60, at 349–51.

<sup>36</sup> See Daniel B Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament with Scripture, Subject, and Greek Word Indexes* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 86–88.

<sup>37</sup> Gaventa, “Calling-into-Being,” 267.

<sup>38</sup> See Ralph P. Martin, *2 Corinthians* (WBC 40; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017) 84–85; Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians* (1st ed.; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 278–80.

<sup>39</sup> George B. Caird, “Expository Problems: Predestination—Romans ix–xi,” *ExpTim* 68.11 (1957) 324–27, at 326. Cf. Cranfield, *Romans*, 492 n. 2: “The potter does not make ordinary, everyday pots, merely in order to destroy them!”

<sup>40</sup> As pointed out by John G. Lodge, *Romans 9–11: A Reader-Response Analysis* (Atlanta: Scholars press, 1996) 84; cf. also Oropeza, “Paul and Theodicy,” 70.

<sup>41</sup> Gaventa, “Calling-into-Being,” 265, 267; Paul W. Gooch, “Sovereignty and Freedom: Some Pauline Compatibilisms,” *SJT* 40 (1987) 531–42, at 537; Munck, *Christ and Israel*, 67–68. Pace Thiessen, *Gott hat Israel nicht verstoßen*, 51–55, who acknowledges that an instrumental aspect (“Werkzeug”) is present in the phrase as used in the verse but regards an objective aspect (“Gefäß”) as in the foreground (54). See also Christian Maurer, “σκευός,” *TWNT* 7:359–68, who also sees

together with the grammar and the close correspondence to scriptural language, the logic of the passage suggests that the *σκεῦη ὀργῆς* of verse 22 should be understood primarily in light of the functions of the prior verse rather than as a reference to the vessels as “objects of wrath.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly, the “vessels of mercy” in verse 23, though surely also recipients of God’s mercy, should therefore be understood as instruments of God’s mercy, fulfilling Israel’s role as a “light to the nations.”<sup>43</sup> The emphasis therefore falls on the qualities of the *σκεῦη* God is forming—each *σκεῦος* serves God’s purposes in the larger plan of redemption, with some bringing destruction and others mercy. Or, to use fuller Jeremic language, some *σκεῦη* function “to uproot, tear down, destroy (*ἀπολλύειν*), and overthrow,” while others function “to rebuild and to plant” (Jer 1:8).

### ■ Reshaped, Not Prepared

God’s instruments of wrath in the Hebrew Bible, however, frequently wind up being destroyed themselves, particularly if they arrogantly supersede their proper boundaries as instruments of wrath. Assyria and its king, for example, are used as “rod of my anger” (Isa 10:5; LXX: *ῥάβδος τοῦ θυμοῦ*) and sent as “my wrath against a lawless nation” (*ἔθνος ἄνομον*), but the king will be destroyed for his own insolence (10:12), having imagined himself to be above the one wielding him as though an “axe [that] boasts over him who cuts with it” (10:15).<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Nebuchadnezzar had been the “servant of YHWH” (Jer 27:6) and Babylon had been used as a mace against the whole earth (50:23), but YHWH will repay Babylon for its violence and “all the evil they have done in Zion before your eyes” (Jer 51:24; 28:24 LXX).<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in Rom 9:22, whereas *σκεῦη ὀργῆς* is best understood in an instrumental sense, the next phrase, *κατηρτισμένα εἰς ἀπόλειαν*, is probably best taken otherwise: *εἰς ἀπόλειαν* is a standard way to denote the fate of a given object.<sup>46</sup> As such, this phrase suggests that the final outcome of these *σκεῦη ὀργῆς* may be—much as it was for the kings of Assyria and Babylon as well as Pharaoh after he was fully hardened and his purpose complete—their own destruction.

both senses, with God working out his wrath both on and through these vessels.

<sup>42</sup> Hanson, “Vessels of Wrath,” 440.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. the observation of Ronald E. Clements, “‘A Remnant Chosen by Grace’ (Romans 11:5): The Old Testament Background and Origin of the Remnant Concept,” in *Pauline Studies* (ed. Donald A. Hagner and Murray J. Harris; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 106–21, at 108, that in texts of the so-called postexilic period, the remnant are often viewed as “the instruments through whom salvation could be brought to all Israel, and even to the Gentiles.” Pace David I. Starling, *Not My People: Gentiles as Exiles in Pauline Hermeneutics* (BZNW 184; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011) 119 n. 44, the phrase in v. 23 is not support for an objective genitive reading in v. 22 but rather should itself be understood instrumentally in light of the pottery metaphor Paul has been employing through the entire passage.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. also the punishment of the house of Jehu for the “bloodshed of Jezreel” (Hos 1:4).

<sup>45</sup> See Gerald L. Keown, Pamela L. Scalise, and Thomas G. Smothers, *Jeremiah 26–52* (WBC 27; Nashville: Nelson, 1995) 370.

<sup>46</sup> E.g., Isa 54:16 LXX; Bar 4:6.

Unfortunately, the participle *κατηρτισμένα* has frequently been read in this passage as though it “expresses a nuance of predestination (damnation),”<sup>47</sup> suggesting that the potter had planned all along to make these vessels for destruction. On the contrary, in contrast to the parallel *προητοιμάσεν* in verse 23—which Paul obviously could have used had he intended to express a nuance of predestination in verse 22—the verb *καταρτίζω* lacks any sense of foreordination.<sup>48</sup> That is, whereas the *προ-* prefix added to the verb *ἐτοιμάζω* in verse 22 clearly pulls forward a prospective sense, the *κατα-* prefix does not carry a nuance of predestination but rather denotes the “completion of the action of the verbal idea.”<sup>49</sup>

This conclusion is confirmed by an examination of the use of *καταρτίζω* outside this passage. Rather than denoting planning or preparation in a prospective sense, the meaning of the word centers on a concept closer to the English idiom “to fix up,” often with a nuance of repair, restoration, or “making good.”<sup>50</sup> That certainly is the case in every other Pauline usage of the term, such as his exhortation that those who are *πνευματικοὶ* “restore” (*καταρτίζετε*) anyone caught in trespass (Gal 6:1) or his desire to “fix” what is lacking in the faith of the Thessalonians (1 Thess 3:10).<sup>51</sup> Elsewhere in the New Testament, the term is used to denote the disciples of Jesus “fixing” their nets (Mk 1:19), a disciple becoming “fully trained” (Lk 6:40), and the final work of God to “establish” those who have “suffered for a little while” (1 Pet 5:10) or “equip” believers to do his will (Heb 13:21).

In the LXX, *καταρτίζω* is the word used to translate the Aramaic *ללל* in reference to the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem (LXX Ezra 4:12, 13, 16; 5:3, 9, 11; 6:14) and appears ten times in LXX Psalms, translating words such as *ן* (“restore/repair” or “fix solidly”; 67:10; 73:16; 88:38), *ן* (“restore” or “repair”; 79:15).<sup>52</sup> One use of the term in later Christian literature intriguingly similar to Rom 9:22 is found in a prayer that God “fix holy vessels (*σκεῦη ἁγία*) for your service” (Ap. John 22:7) specifically through raising two persons from the dead. One nuance that does not appear, however, is that of foreordination; the closest thing to that concept across its use is the idea of “fitting out” ships or fleets (e.g., Polybius, *History*, 1.21, 29, 36) or “making ready” (= “fixing up”) something in anticipation of a future necessity (e.g., Hdt. 9.66; Heb 10:5). But even in these cases, the concept refers to finishing the “fixing up” process rather than planning or foreordination.

The Latin translator of Rom 9:22 also rendered *κατηρτισμένα* with *aptata*, which carries the same nuance of adaptation or adjustment, suggesting that the

<sup>47</sup> Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 570.

<sup>48</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 567.

<sup>49</sup> Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §1648.

<sup>50</sup> See *LSJ*, “καταρτίζω,” 910; *BDAG*, “καταρτίζω,” 526. Outside Jewish and Christian literature, Herodotus uses the term to mean “restore” or “make peace” (5.28, 30, 106), and it appears in medical literature to denote setting a dislocated limb (e.g., Apollonius, *Cit.* 2; Oribasius 49.1.3).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. also 1 Cor 1:10; 13:9, 11.

<sup>52</sup> Other LXX uses include translations of *יסד* (“establish”; 8:3), *שח* (“foundation”; 10:3), *תמן* (“hold fast”; 16:5), *שח* (“make appropriate”; 17:34), *חיל* (“bring forth”; 28:9).

ancient translator also understood *κατηρτισμένα* in this sense.<sup>53</sup> Understanding this adaptive nuance of *κατηρτισμένα* is critical for understanding the passage. Rather than denoting predestination, this participle suggests the image of the potter *remaking* or *fixing* a vessel as part of the process of patiently working with stubborn clay. Whereas the instruments of verse 23 have been shaped in accordance with the original plan, the same cannot be said of the *σκεύη ὀργῆς* in verse 22, despite the patient efforts of the potter. A better representation of these concepts in the passage therefore looks something like this:

Or does the potter not have a right over the clay to make from the same lump a vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable? And<sup>54</sup> if God produced with much patience vessels of wrath reshaped for destruction, wishing<sup>55</sup> to demonstrate his wrath and to make his power known so that he might also make known the riches of his glory toward vessels of mercy, which he prepared beforehand for glory—us whom he also called not only from Jews but also from gentiles.<sup>56</sup> (Rom 9:21–24)

This reading obviates many attempts to grapple with the seeming non sequitur of Paul's logic here, as there is no longer any need "to imagine God hardly being able to contain himself because he so badly wants to destroy these vessels!"<sup>57</sup> Nor need we complain about "the extent to which Paul is willing to bend the analogy of the potter and the vessel . . . for one would not ordinarily speak of being 'patient' with a clay pot on the premise that it will have time to change its shape,"<sup>58</sup> as Paul does not speak of patience with a finished clay pot but rather of a potter still at the wheel patiently molding a lump of not-yet-fired clay. Rather than being the point at which the analogy breaks down, the reference to the potter's patience is the point on which the entire analogy hinges.

### ■ Patient Potter, Stubborn Clay, and Divine Pathos

Unfortunately, the significance of the potter's patience has not been appreciated, because most interpreters have presumed that the analogy serves to illustrate the irresistible power of the artisan over the inanimate substance being shaped. But this is not how the metaphor would be understood by anyone with experience throwing clay, nor is it how the analogy functions in its context. The first problem is that

<sup>53</sup> *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. "aptō," 170.

<sup>54</sup> Pace Cranfield, *Romans*, 492, the particle *δέ* here does not indicate that God's ways are different from a potter's ways but rather that God has behaved like a potter (corresponding to Jer 18:1–11).

<sup>55</sup> I have taken *θέλον* here as denoting purpose rather than in a causal or concessive sense, neither of which makes as much sense once the nuances of *ἤνεγκεν* and *κατηρτισμένα* are understood.

<sup>56</sup> My translation treats these verses as an extended anacoluthon assuming an implied apodosis, following Gaventa, "Calling-into-Being," 265–66. Jewett, *Romans*, 589, suggests that the apodosis "must be supplied from vv. 20–21 with one of the rhetorical questions concerning the right of the creature to challenge the creator."

<sup>57</sup> Oropeza, "Paul and Theodicy," 70.

<sup>58</sup> Jewett, *Romans*, 596. Cf. also Gale, *Analogy*, 198–205; Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 559.

many biblical scholars seem to insufficiently understand or appreciate the difficulty of throwing clay, not recognizing that clay would be an especially poor choice of substance to illustrate the unilateral and irresistible power of the artisan. Indeed, those who work with clay regularly comment on the temperamental willfulness of that material. A sampling of comments from modern potters is instructive:

The funny thing about clay is it kind of has a mind of its own. . . . You can start out making one thing and sometimes it turns into something completely different.<sup>59</sup>

I learned how to throw a pot by first learning about the nature of the clay. Clay is very temperamental. It has a mind of its own. To shape it into something useful you have to know how it will behave under the pressure of your fingers.<sup>60</sup>

It took two years of serious wheel experience before I could readily translate the image in my mind to the lump of clay, and I still sometimes find that the clay has a mind of its own.<sup>61</sup>

Once you've learned that clay has a mind of its own, the next step is to convince it to behave.<sup>62</sup>

One modern potter's more extended reflection on the relationship between potter and clay is especially noteworthy:

The difference is that rather than something specific and circumscribed by our will we can also have intentions that are open ended. . . . Having intention does not simply mean that we are absolutely in control. It can also mean that we are in egalitarian association with something outside ourselves. The intention to be in a relationship doesn't mean that we make sure things unfold entirely to a script of our own devising. Rather, we enter into a partnership and learn to accommodate the new circumstances and desires of that other. *Making pots with this kind of intention means that we are constantly willing to learn from the clay and respond to it at every turn of the wheel. . . .*

Sometimes [it's] entirely appropriate that the clay is allowed to express itself. . . . With the right intentions we can turn the "energy" and "will" of the clay into something harmonious.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Jeannette Jennings, quoted in Joel Hersch, "Calming Creations: There's More to Clay Work Than the Finished Product," *Santa Cruz Sentinel News*, 19 February 2011, <https://www.santacruzsentinel.com/2011/02/19/calming-creations-theres-more-to-clay-work-than-the-finished-product/>.

<sup>60</sup> Shona Patel, *Flame Tree Road* (Don Mills, ON: Mira, 2015) 218. Although a quote from a character in a novel, this statement pithily summarizes the sentiments of many artisans who work with clay.

<sup>61</sup> Nancy Ross, "Frequently Asked Questions," *FinePotter.com*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20160122150640/http://finepotter.com/about/faq>.

<sup>62</sup> Jeff Zamek, "Preventing S-Cracks," *Pottery Making Illustrated* (Fall 2000) 3, 20–24, at 3.

<sup>63</sup> Carter Gillies, "Throwing with Intention and the Akido of Pottery," *Carter Gillies Pottery Blog*, 12 March 2014, <https://cartergilliespottery.wordpress.com/2014/03/12/throwing-with-intention-and-the-aikido-of-pottery/>.

In contrast to the complaints of many modern biblical interpreters (many of whom seem strangely allergic to metaphor) that the potter/clay analogy is poorly suited to represent human willfulness, these potters speak of clay as though it has a “mind of its own” and emphasize that clay has a reputation for behaving as though it were willful and stubborn, requiring patience and dynamic improvisation to produce a good outcome. In this light, the potter/clay relationship provides an especially apt analogy for God’s dynamic and responsive interaction with willful and stubborn humanity. This is, of course, precisely the function of the potter analogy in Jer 18, the earliest, longest, and most famous of the scriptural potter passages,<sup>64</sup> where the potter/clay relationship serves as an object lesson for how God dynamically and responsively interacts with willful and stubborn humanity with exactly the sort of open-ended intention practiced by master potters, being both sovereign and relationally responsive to the clay.<sup>65</sup> In this passage, Jeremiah is instructed to watch a potter at work, where he observes a vessel<sup>66</sup> (ἀγγεῖον/כֶּלֶס) fall apart (διαπίπτω/תִּשָּׁב) in the potter’s hands only to be reworked into another vessel, “as it seemed good to the potter to make it” (18:4), at which point the word of YHWH explains: “Can I not do the same to you as this potter, O house of Israel?” YHWH declares: “See, you are in my hand like the clay in the potter’s hand, O house of Israel” (Jer 18:6).

The following verses (18:7–10) explain that although YHWH is indeed free to do as he chooses, his plans are malleable and responsive to his creations—that is, YHWH operates interactively and according to justice. If YHWH declares blessing or destruction upon a nation and that nation changes its behavior, YHWH can and does change the final outcome (cf. also Ezek 18). That Jeremiah’s application of the potter/clay metaphor has attracted essentially the same complaints that have been lodged against Paul’s notion of patient endurance in Rom 9:22 ironically reinforces the thematic connections between these passages.<sup>67</sup> The lesson is that

<sup>64</sup> Thiessen, *Gott hat Israel nicht verstoßen*, 52. Cf. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 565; Hays, *Echoes*, 65–66; Wagner, “Who Has Believed,” 81–84.

<sup>65</sup> Jack R. Lundbom notes that although Jeremiah’s application of the potter/clay analogy certainly argues for the final sovereignty and power of YHWH, “it says at least as much about the malleability of creation in fulfilling or frustrating the divine will” (*Jeremiah 1–20: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [Accordance electronic ed., AB; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974] 815).

<sup>66</sup> There are a few text-critical issues in Jer 18:4, but none are significant in the context of this study. See Daniel A. Frese, “Lessons from the Potter’s Workshop: A New Look at Jeremiah 18.1–11,” *JSOT* 37 (2013) 371–88, at 385; William L. Holladay, *Jeremiah I: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah, Chapters 1–25* (Hermeneia 24A; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 512.

<sup>67</sup> Interpreters unacquainted with clay’s reputation for stubbornness have assumed that since inanimate clay cannot resist the potter, it cannot adequately represent human agency. E.g., Frese, “Lessons from the Potter’s Workshop,” 373, 386; Walter Bruggemann, *A Commentary on Jeremiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 168; Philip R. Davies, “Joking in Jeremiah 18,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Athalya Brenner-Idan and Yehuda T. Radday; London: Black, 1990) 191–202, at 195; David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018) 145; Adam C. Welch, *Jeremiah, His Time and His Work* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951)

although YHWH does shape the destiny of people and nations, YHWH does not do so unilaterally or arbitrarily, nor is the impending destruction (18:11) of Jerusalem the result of an immutable plan of YHWH but is instead his response to their insolent and stubborn behavior.<sup>68</sup> Abraham Heschel argues that this understanding of a responsive God who is affected by his creation is not only brought into focus in this oracle but is a distinctive emphasis throughout the biblical prophets:

The divine pathos represents a sharp antithesis to the belief in destiny, or the idea of the inevitable necessity controlling the affairs of man. Pathos, a dynamic category which makes every decision provisional and contingent upon what man does with his existence, conquers fate. The ultimate power is not an inscrutable, blind, and hostile power, to which man must submit in resignation, but a God of justice and mercy, to Whom man is called upon to return, and by returning he may effect a change in what is decreed.<sup>69</sup>

The upshot of Jer 18 is the disturbing warning that the benefits of YHWH's covenant are contingent on Israel's obedience.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, what is true for Israel in this regard is equally true for *any* nation or kingdom (18:7–10).<sup>71</sup> God's judgment may fall upon Israel as a result of disobedience, and conversely, blessing may fall upon the nations if they repent from their evil ways.

## ■ Paul's Patient Potter in Context

These themes are obviously picked up in Romans, as Paul argues for the incorporation of gentiles and exclusion of some Israelites on the basis of God's patience (2:4; 9:22) and impartiality (2:11) in response to human rebellion (1:18–32). Faced with the accusation that God is therefore unjust, Paul appeals to the same potter/clay analogy used by Jeremiah to argue against an image of an arbitrary, capricious, and impassive deity in favor of a God who not only can be impacted and affected by human actions but also mercifully and patiently improvises with obstinate "clay" while still working toward the larger plan of redemption. That is, like Jeremiah, Paul employs the potter/clay analogy to argue that:

though [YHWH] is sovereign, the people have a will of their own which they exert against him. . . . [YHWH] is capable of both uprooting and demolishing on the one hand, and of building and planting on the other. He may intend

188; John Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951) 163. See also the summary of complaints in Terence E. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God: A Study of Jeremiah 18:7–10," *Hebrew Annual Review* 11 (1987) 81–92, at 81.

<sup>68</sup> Thiessen, *Gott hat Israel nicht verstoßen*, 52: "It is about the fact that because of the people's hardness of heart, God goes to court with the people and that he, as the creator, has a right to do so." Cf. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 565; Hays, *Echoes*, 65–66; Wagner, "Who Has Believed," 81–84.

<sup>69</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 310; cf. also *ibid.*, 365–68, which discusses the connections between divine wrath, patience, and pathos as portrayed in the prophets.

<sup>70</sup> Lundbom, *Jeremiah 1–20*, 815; cf. Fretheim, "The Repentance of God," 89–90; Skinner, *Prophecy and Religion*, 163.

<sup>71</sup> Wagner, "Who Has Believed," 83.

the one, but if the response of the people demands it, he will do the other. This is the lesson of the potter. Some pots turn out fine the first time. Some do not, so the potter changes his tactics. It is a striking presentation of divine sovereignty and human freedom.<sup>72</sup>

Unfortunately, Paul's modern interpreters have mostly missed this appeal to divine pathos, struggling to make sense of God's patience (*μακροθυμία*) in this passage, perhaps because it never enters their mind that Paul—like the Hebrew prophets—is actually arguing for a God of pathos who can suffer or be affected by human actions.<sup>73</sup> But Paul seems not to share his modern interpreters' compunctions about divine impassivity, instead employing the image of a long-suffering potter amending clay against the idea of an arbitrary and capricious deity who sets out to condemn those he is forming.<sup>74</sup> For both Jeremiah and Paul, God is by no means impassive but is impacted and affected by human actions, mercifully and patiently improvising like a potter working with stubborn clay.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, to say that God has demonstrated *μακροθυμία* inherently implies pathos, since that very word means that one is not simply getting one's way but must rather interact with and respond to something outside oneself—thus the common rendering “long-suffering.”<sup>76</sup> Thus, although the divine potter has the final say over the end product, those decisions are not arbitrary but depend in part on interaction with the clay. The clay has no right to complain to the potter precisely because, in seeking to produce the most useful vessel, the potter has improvised as necessitated by the clay's resistance to the potter's hand and tendency to become misshapen.

## ■ Israel's Resistance and God's Patient Fidelity

God's faithfulness in spite of Israel's stubbornness is, of course, a core theme of Rom 9–11. Unfortunately, the historical resonance of Paul's argument in 9:20–23 has too often been overlooked, as many interpreters have assumed that in these verses Paul has suddenly expanded his vision beyond Israel such that the lump of 9:21 represents all humanity rather than Israel. Dunn, for example, dismisses Paul's mention of the lump as irrelevant, suggesting that “Paul's point could be made

<sup>72</sup> Holladay, *Jeremiah I*, 517.

<sup>73</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 318–43. Fretheim, “The Repentance of God,” 82, 84, notes the same problem has often characterized modern scholarly interpretations of Jer 18.

<sup>74</sup> This should hardly be surprising, as two of the first three characteristics in YHWH's self-description in Exod 34:6–7 reflect divine responsiveness and pathos: רחום (“compassionate” or “sympathetic”; derived from רחם “womb”) and ארך אפים (“slow to anger”; LXX μακρόθυμος).

<sup>75</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 91: “The mere fact that their God will repent . . . should impress upon Israel the remarkably patient and merciful ways of its God as well as the seriousness with which it should take its own response to God.”

<sup>76</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 558: “To appreciate the force of *μακροθυμία* here it must be recalled that God's patience with his chosen people was one of Israel's most common refrains (Exod 34:6; see on 9:15). . . . But 2 Macc 6:14–16 thinks of God's patience with regard to other nations simply as an allowing them to reach the full measure of their sins, in contrast to his purpose of mercy in disciplining his own people.”



without this emphasis . . . he no doubt intends a reminder that all humanity, Israel included, is made of the same common (lump of) clay.”<sup>77</sup> It seems best, however, not to ignore or dismiss as unnecessary the few details we do have, especially since there is no question that the lump (φύραμα) of 11:16 represents Israel.<sup>78</sup>

Moreover, despite Dunn’s assertion of what Paul “no doubt intends,”<sup>79</sup> the potter/clay metaphor appears in the context of a larger argument in Rom 9 about God’s dealings with Israel, coming at the end of a chronological retelling of the narrowing of the heirs of the promise to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and then the nation of Israel, which divided into two parts, one of which (northern Israel) was rejected and cast among the nations (cf. Hos 8:8). Thus when Paul states that not all “from the same lump (ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ φυράματος)” (9:21) are made into the same kind of vessel, this analogy is best understood as further developing the thesis of 9:6, a difficult statement that obviously requires clarification,<sup>80</sup> explaining how God’s choice to make dishonorable use of a portion of Israel squares with the covenantal promises of Israel’s redemption.<sup>81</sup>

The historical context is further reinforced by the question of verse 19, the import of which is frequently overlooked by interpreters. In contrast to the analogous questions of Job 9:19 and Wis 12:12, which use the future ἀνιστήσεται (“who will resist”) to cast doubt on the potential of human resistance, Paul asks an empirical question, “Who *has resisted?*” (ἀνθέστηκεν).<sup>82</sup> Unfortunately, most interpreters have assumed that “the perfect tense has no past-referring significance here,”<sup>83</sup> with most English translations either glossing with the present (NASB) or a statement of capacity, “Who can resist his will?” (NRSV, ESV, TEV, NEB, REB) or “Who is able to resist his will?” (NIV). But the use of the perfect is indeed significant here; the force of the “empirical perfect” as opposed to other gnomic options is precisely that the general truth claim is “expressly based on a fact of experience,” with the present truth dependent on past observation.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 557.

<sup>78</sup> See James W. Aageson, “Typology, Correspondence, and the Application of Scripture in Romans 9–11,” *JSNT* 31 (1987) 51–72, at 71 n. 56; Michel, *Römer*, 347–48; N. T. Wright, “The Messiah and the People of God: A Study in Pauline Theology with Particular Reference to the Argument of the Epistle to the Romans” (DPhil diss., University of Oxford, 1980), 186; Pablo T. Gadenz, *Called from the Jews and from the Gentiles: Pauline Ecclesiology in Romans 9–11* (WUNT 267; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009) 193–94, 260. Note also that Paul uses φύραμα to refer to Christ-followers in 1 Cor 5:7.

<sup>79</sup> Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 557.

<sup>80</sup> See Gadenz, *Called from Jews and Gentiles*, 193–94; Jewett, *Romans*, 594.

<sup>81</sup> If the lump is Israel, the suggestion of Battle, “Paul’s Use,” 125–27, that the “vessels of wrath” of v. 22 refers to gentile oppressors of Israel is impossible, as these vessels also derive from the same lump as the vessels of mercy. For the sense of honor and dishonor in 9:21 as referencing differing uses or functions, see Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 557.

<sup>82</sup> The force of the phrase is “Who has ever resisted,” as rightly observed by Jewett, *Romans*, 591; cf. also Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 568.

<sup>83</sup> Moo, *Romans*, 600.

<sup>84</sup> See Smyth, *Greek Grammar*, §1948.

The question therefore fits well in the context of the historical argument to this point in Rom 9, and Paul responds by “drawing on a traditional metaphor for God’s relationship to creation, and, more specifically, to his people Israel.”<sup>85</sup> Specifically, through this metaphor, Paul argues that Israel has in fact resisted God, but despite Israel’s past disobedience, God is accomplishing his redemptive purposes through and for Israel by unexpected means. In this respect, Paul’s application of the metaphor is again consistent with the potter/clay passages in the prophets, particularly those of Isaiah. J. Ross Wagner points out that the potter passages in Isaiah 29:16/45:9 (particularly the latter) are in the context of restoration promises, continuing:

Both of these Isaianic passages set the clay’s challenge to the potter in the context of Israel’s confrontation with God over his chosen means of redemption. Israel is portrayed as blind and deaf, doubting God’s wisdom and resisting his appointed means of redemption, either by relying on their own schemes for salvation or by questioning God’s plan of deliverance.<sup>86</sup>

Significantly, the clay is not portrayed as passive in these passages but rather as challenging its maker, serving as a satirical image for Israel’s rebellion and accusations against YHWH. In this context, as with Jeremiah, the potter/clay images in Isaiah do not suggest that YHWH works irresistibly—the very rebellion that has prompted these oracles demonstrates Israel’s capacity to resist. Instead, these passages rebuke the stubbornness of the people, who should submit to their creator rather than resisting him.<sup>87</sup> In the same way, Paul’s (slightly amended) quotation of Isa 29:16 in Rom 9:20 is not an assertion of unilateral divine fiat but instead calls attention to the foolishness of humans imagining they could rightly impugn God’s justice, a point he further reinforces by appealing to God’s pathos in the next verses.<sup>88</sup>

Paul follows his version of the potter/clay analogy in 9:31–33 by making precisely the same point as Isaiah about Israel’s resistance to God’s appointed means of redemption, arguing that Israel thereby stumbled over the stumbling stone (9:32).<sup>89</sup> Consequently, some of Israel was even discarded among the nations; indeed, the language in 9:20–23 recalls Hosea’s lament that northern “Israel is

<sup>85</sup> Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News*, 57–58. Paul’s argument can of course be expanded to apply to humanity in general (as also in the potter/clay passages in the Hebrew Bible), but Israel remains in focus throughout this passage.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 67–68; see also 68–71.

<sup>87</sup> As observed by Fretheim, “The Repentance of God,” 84. Note also the connection to Pharaoh in Isa 29–30, as noted by Oropeza, “Paul and Theodicy,” 68.

<sup>88</sup> Paul’s emendation of “You did not make me” (Isa 29:16 LXX) to “Why did you make me thus?” (Rom 9:20) is similarly not insignificant, as it transforms a denial of God’s role into a question of God’s justice better suited for the context in Romans.

<sup>89</sup> For this passage as referencing Israel in the past (note the aorist ἔφθασεν in 9:31), see Jason A. Staples, “Reconstructing Israel: Restoration Eschatology in Early Judaism and Paul’s Gentile Mission” (PhD diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2016) 525–30.

swallowed up; they are now in the nations like a worthless vessel (LXX: ὡς σκεῦος ἄχρηστον)” (Hos 8:8) and Jeremiah’s declaration that recently exiled king Jeconiah/Jehoiachin “is dishonored (ἀτιμώθη) like a useless vessel, for he is hurled out and cast into a land which he did not know” (Jer 22:28 LXX).<sup>90</sup> But dishonor and wrath are not God’s final word either for Jehoiachin’s descendants or for the northern tribes, a point Paul highlights in 9:24–25.

These echoes and the potter/clay metaphor itself remind the reader not only that the divine potter has the right to make vessels of dishonor from disobedient Israel but that God has always reserved the right to respond to Israel’s disobedience in this manner. Indeed, God has previously made an unfaithful portion of Israel into a vessel for dishonorable use and cast that worthless vessel among the nations. Not coincidentally, God is now calling instruments of mercy from among the nations where Israel was sown (Zech 10:9; cf. Hos 2:23), redeeming the not-people from their useless state (9:24–26).<sup>91</sup> The master potter has therefore used even the disobedience of his people to bring about mercy and redemption (cf. Rom 11:25–26), a purpose that has paradoxically been facilitated even by disobedient instruments of wrath. By implication, if God has made redemptive use even of Israel’s past disobedience, the same can be expected of any disobedience in the present. The incorporation of transformed gentiles therefore serves not as evidence of God’s unfaithfulness but rather as proof that God’s faithfulness to unfaithful Israel extends even further than previously imagined. God’s mercy ultimately supersedes his wrath, completing the circle of redemption (cf. Rom 11:28–36).

## ■ Hardening and Destruction

Nevertheless, the passage warns that despite the potter’s great patience in reshaping the obstinate clay, the end result of these vessels may be—as was the case with Jehoiachin and northern Israel in the eighth century—their own destruction (εἰς ἀπόλειαν). This was also the result in Jeremiah’s case, as the people rejected the prophet’s appeal for repentance in Jer 18, at which point Jeremiah takes up a complaint before YHWH. The next chapter of Jeremiah proceeds to demonstrate what happens with a hardened vessel that is no longer useful, as the prophet is this

<sup>90</sup> That Hosea calls Israel ἄχρηστον (a homonym of ἄχριστον, “without Christ”) is especially evocative, as Paul himself employs this pun in Romans (see Rom 3:12). Epictetus applies the same language of a person as a “worthless vessel (σκεῦον . . . σαπρὸν . . . σκεῦος ἄχρηστον),” a parallel noted by Jewett, *Romans*, 594 n. 72, though Jewett does not mention the same language in Hosea. As noted by Holladay, *Jeremiah I*, 610, the phrase “useless vessel” in Jer 22:28 is itself “a quotation from Hos 8:8. . . . Now, therefore, Jehoiachin will suffer the same fate as the northern tribes.” Similarly, Paul’s echo of the same language both reminds the reader of past judgments against Israel and suggests that God still reserves the right to respond to his people in precisely the same way. See also Ep. Jer. 15.

<sup>91</sup> On Paul’s application of the promises of northern Israel’s restoration to gentiles, see Staples, “Reconstructing Israel,” 462–602; idem, “What Do the Gentiles Have to Do with ‘All Israel’? A Fresh Look at Romans 11:25–27,” *JBL* 130 (2011) 371–90.

time instructed to buy a clay jar (βῆκον/קבוקב) and break it in the sight of the elders and priests as a declaration that YHWH would similarly shatter Jerusalem (19:1–15).

This contrast between clay still being shaped on the wheel and that which has already been hardened is fundamental to understanding the imagery in Romans as well,<sup>92</sup> as the potter/clay analogy grows out of the “hardening” (σκληρύνω) language in 9:18, which calls back to YHWH hardening Pharaoh’s heart in Exodus.<sup>93</sup> Notably, the nominal form of the σκληρ- root appears elsewhere in Greek literature in reference to clay hardened in a kiln, providing a linguistic link to the potter/clay metaphor in the succeeding verses.<sup>94</sup> The potter/clay metaphor therefore clarifies the sense in which God “hardened” Pharaoh: in the context of clay pottery, hardening (σκληρύνω) does not involve reshaping but instead involves permanently fixing the clay in its final shape and is therefore best understood as the final step of judgment, after which there is no repentance available or reshaping possible.<sup>95</sup>

But in 9:20–23, the potter is still shaping the clay, which has not yet been hardened. God’s mercy entails showing patience with the clay, trying to form it into a better vessel prior to hardening it in its final state.<sup>96</sup> The destiny of these vessels is not yet determined; they are still being “fixed,” as one second-century Christian explains:

For we are clay in the hand of the craftsman. As in the case of a potter: if he makes a vessel that is turned or crushed in his hands, he can reshape it again. But if he has already put it into the kiln, he can no longer rescue it. Thus also with us. As long as we are in this world, we should repent from the evil that we did in the flesh. (2 Clem. 8:2)

Unlike Pharaoh, the vessels of Rom 9:20–23 have not yet been hardened and are still subject to the potter’s patient mercy with the potential to be reshaped. Their future remains open-ended. Those that stubbornly persist in disobedience, however, will eventually be hardened and destroyed. In light of God’s pathos and mercy, the potter/clay imagery serves as a call to repentance for those vessels that are as yet unfinished and unhardened, who are reminded that “God’s good purposes may be relied upon absolutely, but neither Israel nor any other entire community can be *guaranteed* participation in the reality of fulfillment irrespective of their response.”<sup>97</sup>

<sup>92</sup> Pace Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, 559, Paul is not thinking of the potter “breaking the flawed pot to reconstruct it” as though the pot is already formed (as also Jewett, *Romans*, 596). Rather, the process of reshaping takes place before the pot is hardened. Cf. also Gale, *Analogy*, 198–205; Jewett, *Romans*, 596.

<sup>93</sup> Exod 4:21; 7:3, 22; 8:15 [ET 8:19]; 9:12, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8; 14:17.

<sup>94</sup> Plutarch, *Publ.* 13.2.4 [103]; cf. also Aristotle, *Met.* 383a25 (figs rather than clay); 386a24; *Gen. an.* 743a15; Ps. Aristotle, [*Probl.*] 12.10.1–2 (931a).

<sup>95</sup> Note that the nuance of completion implicit in καταρτίζω serves well to describe the final steps of the formation and firing of the clay, as the vessels are finally “fixed” for destruction.

<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, Paul presents himself and his coworkers as ὄστρακίνοις σκεύεσιν (“vessels of fired clay,” 2 Cor 4:7), suggesting that he may regard his own purpose as already fixed.

<sup>97</sup> Fretheim, “The Repentance of God,” 89, further citing Ezek 18:21–26 and Am 5:18–20.

## ■ Conclusion: Paul's God of Pathos

We can therefore conclude that, contrary to the prevailing interpretation of Rom 9:20–23, Paul does not employ the potter/clay metaphor to defend God's right to arbitrary choice. Indeed, due to its reputation for having a "mind of its own," clay is precisely the wrong material to use for such an argument, but it does make for an excellent analogy for how even a skilled artisan must interact with input from the material, improvising to produce the most desirable outcome. Although Paul would surely agree with his modern interpreters that "God has absolute autonomy to show mercy to any person he chooses,"<sup>98</sup> the essential thrust of Paul's argument here is that the God of Israel nevertheless does not act arbitrarily but interactively and responsively.<sup>99</sup> For Paul, the God of Israel is not only sovereign but is also a God of pathos and justice. The potter/clay metaphor therefore serves to demonstrate that God's sovereignty over the final outcome in no way eliminates human freedom or responsibility, because God's decisions are relational and responsive to human agents. As Paul Gooch explains, "We end up with a Pauline notion of divine sovereignty which includes the powerful will of a creator who could be arbitrary but is not, who could be irresistible but who may grant us scope for our own free response."<sup>100</sup> In this respect, Heschel's description of the God of the prophets applies equally well to Paul's argument in Romans:

There is a biblical belief in divine grace, in a mercy which is bestowed upon [humanity] to a degree greater than he deserves. There is no belief in divine arbitrariness, in an anger which consumes and afflicts without moral justification.<sup>101</sup>

In the process, Paul gives a surprising answer to the question "Who has resisted his will?" (Rom 9:19): We have. This answer underscores the importance of the empirical perfect (*ἀνθέστηκεν*) in 9:19b; whereas the future tense (as in Job 9:19 and Wis 12:12) sets up the obvious "no one," the use of the perfect sets up the argument that Israel has in fact resisted God's will. The upshot is that humans have no right to question God not because they are unable to resist God's will but rather because they can and do resist God's will.<sup>102</sup> Perhaps this answer should not

<sup>98</sup> J. L. de Villiers, "The Salvation of Israel according to Romans 9–11," *Neot* 15 (1981) 199–221, at 202.

<sup>99</sup> Paul's appeal to God's mercy in Rom 9 is therefore similar to the summary of the prophetic message by Heschel, *The Prophets*, 306: "The way to God is mediated not only by the interplay of deed and redemption. . . . Above reward and punishment is the mystery of His pathos. Sin does not inevitably bring about punishment. Between act and retribution stands the Lord God, 'merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, forgiving iniquity, and transgression, and sin' (Exod. 34:6f). He remembers that 'man is but flesh' (Ps. 78:39). Indeed, the central message of the prophets was the call to return."

<sup>100</sup> Gooch, "Sovereignty and Freedom," 540–41.

<sup>101</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 381.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. R. Waddy Moss, "A Study of Jeremiah's Use (xviii. 1–17) of the Figure of the Potter," *ExpTim* 2.12 (1891) 274–75, at 274: Jeremiah reveals that humans "can actually, by their choice

be so surprising. After all, Paul has opened this very epistle with an account of humans rebelling against God in 1:18–32, and Israel repeatedly resists God’s will throughout the biblical narratives. As Heschel points out, the prophets admonished Israel precisely because God’s plans were being frustrated:

Israel’s history comprised a drama of God and all men. God’s kingship and man’s hope were at stake in Jerusalem. God was alone in the world, unknown or discarded. The countries of the world were full of abominations, violence, falsehood. Here was one land, one people, cherished and chosen for the purpose of transforming the world. *This* people’s failure was most serious.<sup>103</sup>

Unfortunately, most commentators have been led astray by the assumption that the only possible answer to the question of who has resisted God is “no one.” But Paul subverts this expectation, explaining that Israel has in fact resisted God’s purposes, and like a master potter, God has used even Israel’s past disobedience for redemptive purposes and will continue to do so. Paul does not therefore use the image of a potter working with clay to present an irresistible, capricious deity who predetermines the fate of each individual by fiat but rather a God of pathos who patiently and responsively crafts stubborn clay.<sup>104</sup> Those who have resisted God therefore have no right to complain about God’s decisions (cf. 9:20), as God’s plans are dynamic and characterized by justice, rendering “to each according to his works” (Rom 2:6).<sup>105</sup>

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of evil or carelessness concerning right, frustrate God’s purposes of grace, just as by penitence and self-reform they can avert a doom that is impending.” Cf. also Heschel, *The Prophets*, 253.

<sup>103</sup> Heschel, *The Prophets*, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Kylie Crabbe, “Being Found Fighting against God: Luke’s Gamaliel and Josephus on Human Responses to Divine Providence,” *ZNW* 106 (2015) 21–39, sees a similar principle at work in the *Jewish War* by Josephus and the book of Acts, in which divine providence is “an unstoppable force” (22) but “human responses to divine providence have eschatological consequences. . . . [B]y failing to embrace divine providence, characters can become fighters of God and, in so doing, bring disaster upon themselves” (39).

<sup>105</sup> In this respect, Paul’s argument is in keeping with Ps 61:13 LXX, which says the Lord’s ἔλεος (=ἰσότης) is reflected in the fact that he will “return to everyone according to his works.”