

Did God Really Hate Esau?

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Within the controversial passage of Romans 9:6-24, we read these words:

For though the twins were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God’s purpose according to His choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger.” Just as it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.” (Romans 9:11-13)

One objection that has been put forward by those who say that man’s own decision either to accept Christ or reject Him is ultimately the determining factor in his own salvation, is an assertion that Romans 9:13 actually says something different than what the text itself would indicate. In this verse, Paul quoted from Malachi 1:2-3 to clarify the point that he intended to communicate. Romans 9:13 reads: “Just as it is written, ‘Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.’”

Those who object to the doctrine of predestination as God’s choice alone will assert that God really did not “hate” Esau, but that He only loved Esau “less” than He loved Jacob. The Greek word from the original text, which is translated as

“hated” in Romans 9:13, could be interpreted as “hated” in the sense that we all understand hatred, which is to detest someone, or it could be interpreted as “loved less”.

Those who adhere to the free will doctrine of salvation must insist that the Greek word which is translated as “hated” in this passage, should actually have been translated as “loved less”. Without taking this position, their doctrine would clearly be shown to be contradicted by Paul’s teaching in Romans 9:6-24. The question that we must ask ourselves is this: What is the correct interpretation of the Greek word that is translated as “hated” in the text of Romans 9:13?

As with any interpretation of Scripture, we must consider the context of the passage from which the Scripture is taken. With an examination of the context of this passage in Romans 9:6-24, we see that Paul referred to vessels of God’s wrath, who are prepared for destruction (Romans 9:22). We also see reference to vessels of God’s mercy, “which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.” (Romans 9:23-24). We also see in Romans 9:18 that God has mercy upon those whom He wants to have mercy, and He hardens those whom He wants to harden.

Words like the ones Paul used in verse 22 of this passage, “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction”, do indeed imply hatred as we all understand hatred, which is to detest someone, and they do imply rejection by God. These words do not imply “loving less” as some would say.

Therefore, the context of this passage within which Romans 9:13 is found does not support the assertion that God loved Esau “less” than Jacob. Rather, it supports exactly what the text reads literally, which is that God did in fact hate or detest Esau. And that is why Paul used this Scripture from Malachi to support his teaching here. He used God’s love of Jacob and His hatred of Esau as demonstrated in Malachi 1:2-5, in order to illustrate God’s sovereign choice or election of a people for Himself who are recipients of His mercy, while the rest receive no such mercy.

To carry our examination of the context of this passage further, we can look at the context of the passage in Malachi from which Paul takes this verse, in an effort to see if the context there supports the assertion that God really did not hate Esau, but only loved him less than Jacob. Romans 9:13 contains a quotation taken from a passage in Malachi 1 which reads:

“I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you say, “How have You loved us?” “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob; but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.” Though Edom says, “We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins”; thus says the Lord of hosts, “They may build, but I will tear down; and men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever.” Your eyes will see this and you will say, “The Lord be magnified beyond the border of Israel!” (Malachi 1:2-5)

In verse 3 of this passage, God spoke of His hatred for Esau (the descendants of Esau are the people of Edom) by saying that “I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.” Further, God said in verse 4 that they would be called: “the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever.”

These words and their meaning are clear and can be interpreted in no other way. The words, “the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever” make it clear that God did indeed hate or detest Esau. So from the context of Romans 9:6-24, and also from the context of Malachi 1:2-5, we see that God did not love Esau less than He loved Jacob, but He did indeed hate Esau in the sense that all of us understand the word hatred.

The teaching that Paul intended to communicate by way of scriptural reference to Jacob and Esau, is that there are individuals whom God has decided to love, before they are even born, and before they have done anything at all either good or bad, as was the case with Jacob. These individuals receive His mercy. Likewise, there are also individuals whom God has decided not to love, but to hate, before they are even born, as was the case with Esau. These individuals do not receive His mercy.

The assertion that many have made in an attempt to support the free will doctrine of salvation, which is that God did not really hate Esau, but only loved him less than Jacob, is actually contradicted by the context of both Romans 9 and Malachi 1. Therefore, this assertion is invalid and fails to challenge the apparent meaning of Paul’s teaching in Romans 9:6-24. And so we see that the meaning intended by Paul is exactly what is indicated in the language of the text.

What Paul intended to communicate is that God chooses some people to receive His mercy, while others do not receive His mercy; rather they are left in

their sins. Those whom God chooses to receive His mercy Paul described as “vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory, even us, whom He also called, not only from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles” (Romans 9:23b-24). Those who do not receive God’s mercy but are left in their sins, Paul described as “vessels of wrath prepared for destruction” (Romans 9:22b).

Further, Paul emphasized in this passage of Romans 9 that man’s own will or desire or decision is not the determining factor in his salvation, but his salvation depends solely upon whether he is one to whom God has decided to show mercy. This teaching is given to us clearly in Romans 9:16 where Paul said: “***So then it does not depend on the man who wills*** or the man who runs, but on God who has mercy” (emphasis added).

Paul also said in Romans 9:18: “So then He has mercy on whom He desires, and He hardens whom He desires.” And once again, the very fact that Paul anticipated objections and protests to what he was teaching (Romans 9:14, 19) tells us that he was indeed teaching what many would consider to be hard, unfair and unjust.