

Big story: Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21

Paul claims that no one is “out”—neither the people of Israel for not accepting the Christian story nor the non-Jewish people for not being part of Israel’s story.

by [Amy B. Hunter](#) in the [July 26, 2005](#) issue

Paul and Jesus, each facing a crisis, are tempted to succumb to despair and fear. Each man has gone out in ministry to his own people and been rejected. Paul recognizes that his Jewish listeners do not accept his message about Jesus and opens Romans 9 with what is the barest beginning of his anxious questioning about whether God’s salvation story still includes the people of Israel. The context in Matthew’s Gospel for Jesus’ feeding of the 5,000 differs significantly from accounts in the other three Gospels. Here, Jesus has withdrawn from his ministry and his disciples after the double blow of being rejected in his hometown and learning about the execution of John the Baptist. Both Paul and Jesus respond by turning to God, who above all is compassionate.

Reading Paul’s three-chapter-long discussion about God and Israel, I wish Paul had had the benefit of modern wisdom about e-mail—*Don’t write anything you wouldn’t want the whole world to read*. Romans 9-11 has been used to justify anti-Semitic belief and behavior and has led to all manner of speculation about election and predestination and faith versus works and true religion and who is chosen by God and who is not. So I approach these words rather gingerly, feeling a bit as if Paul has written a private rant (one best read only by a trusted friend) and then hit “Reply—Send to All.”

And yet, Paul’s ending is in his beginning. In these opening words, he writes not to criticize the Jewish people but to claim them and their story as his own. His response to his failure to persuade them is not rejection of them in turn but “great sorrow and unceasing anguish.” Paul continues to claim his people and culture as the basic story of God’s saving work in the world and as the source not only of the tradition

underlying the Christian movement but even of Jesus. Paul writes with yearning and compassion (and a little drama, “I could wish myself accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred”). Building upon this opening, Paul will go on to claim the story of Israel anew, insisting that God continues to love the people of Israel and that the story is much bigger than anyone suspects. The story encompasses not only Israel but all humanity. The point is not human accomplishment or failure but God’s compassion and graciousness, the divine generosity which opens the story up when human rejection and anger would close it down.

Paul bases his hope and his theology upon the unfailing compassion of God. Jesus, having retreated after personal rejection and John’s death, moves from withdrawal to compassionate action. Pulling back to a deserted place to rethink strategy when faced with failure and the threat of death is logical and intelligent. Yet, when the crowd pursues him, Jesus, moved by compassion, chooses their need over his own and heals the sick. When his disciples finally approach him at the end of the day with the logical, intelligent suggestion that he dismiss the crowd so they may go find some food, Jesus answers, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” The story unfolds in a few compact actions. The disciples have only five loaves and two fish. Jesus says, “Bring them here to me.” The crowd sits, and Jesus takes the food, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to the disciples, who then distribute it to the people. All are fed and filled. The story resonates with images—God’s gift of manna in the wilderness as Moses led the people, the approaching final meal that Jesus will eat with his disciples, and the Eucharist. But what holds and connects all is Jesus’ choice not to withdraw and retreat in the face of danger, not to shrink the story down to personal safety and survival. Faced with a very human crowd of people who are sick and hungry and in need, Jesus turns from flight to embody God’s compassion and grace.

More than that, Jesus insists that his disciples make such compassion their own work as well. This feeding is not a razzle-dazzle spectacle to boost Jesus’ image with the crowd. It begins with the insistence that the disciples themselves give the people something to eat. This story is not one of a wonder worker and his astonished onlookers, but the much bigger one of Jesus charging those who follow him to be agents of God’s compassion and power.

I have a friend who has been described as, among many other things, “a Buddhist, Anglican sympathizer, and antirealist about God.” Although he’s not a Christian, he

loves chapels and likes to kneel quietly beneath stained glass. He imagines that others perceive him to be trespassing in “our space” and in “our story.” Paul and Jesus challenge me to see that there can be no possibility of trespass, because the story is always larger than we imagine. Paul claims that no one is “out,” neither the people of Israel for not accepting the Christian story nor the non-Jewish people for not being part of Israel’s story. God’s story is a far greater story, one able to hold all the stories and characters.

Even more, Jesus insists that the story is one of enveloping compassion. All that the people have to do to be fed is be hungry and in need. No creeds, no spiritual or cultural pedigrees, no vows of loyalty are required. “You give them something to eat,” Jesus charges his disciples then and today. To all who come, whether to be healed, to be fed, to doubt or simply to kneel beneath stained glass, Jesus insists that the church claim a story big enough to hold them all.

They need not go away.