

## A Possible Translation of Romans 15:8-9a—Part 1

### Introduction

Here is the Authorised Version (based on the Received Text) translation of these verses:

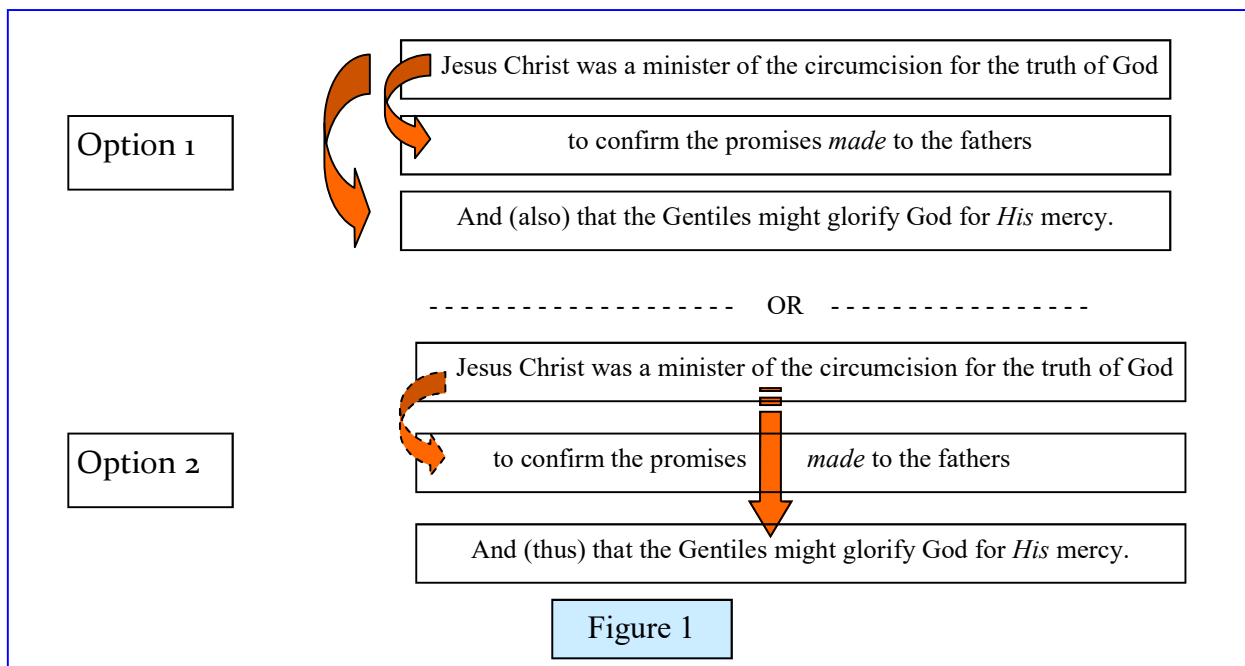
(v. 8): “Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises *made* unto the fathers:

(v.9a): And that the Gentiles might glorify God for *his* mercy;”

However, the best way to translate Rom. 15:8-9a is a hotly contested topic! In this series of articles I wish to see whether i) contextual and ii) structural considerations can help us.

I think the key translation issue (but there are others!) concerns the relationship of v. 9a to verse 8. Now verse 8 just on its own is straightforward: it is clear that Paul is saying that Christ’s servanthood to the Circumcision served “to confirm the promises to the fathers”. So far, so good. But where does “the Gentiles glorifying God” in v. 9a fit in? Does it follow just from Christ’s servanthood in the same way as the confirmation of the promises to the fathers follows from Christ’s servanthood, or does it perhaps rather follow from Christ’s servanthood to the Circumcision through, in consequence of or by means of the confirming of the promises to the fathers?

We can represent the above two possibilities (Options 1 and 2) by means of the following diagram (Figure 1):



The Authorised Version appears to support the first of these possibilities. This translation is also the one preferred by Douglas Moo in his excellent Romans commentary. (He also presents a possible translation preferred by C. E. B. Cranfield in *his* Romans commentary). D. Moo's preferred translation is given below (Figure 2):

"Paul might intend v. 8b and v. 9a as two parallel purpose expressions dependent on v. 8a:

I say that Christ has become a servant of the circumcision for the sake of the truth of God,

- a. in order to confirm the promises made to the fathers;
- b. and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for the sake of his mercy".

(From Douglas Moo's commentary)

Figure 2

Although the AV translation *appears* to follow this pattern (as already noted), this is not *necessarily* the case, and it rather depends on how we are to understand the meaning of the little word "and" at the start of v. 9. This is illustrated in the "excursus" below:

#### Excursus No. 1

Consider the following sentence:

"Following the victory, the new governor raised the flag and set the prisoners free."

Here, "and" is, grammatically, a coordinating conjunction describing two separate actions by the governor.

However, the following is a slightly different use of "and":

"Following the victory, the governor opened John's prison cell, and John was a free man."

Here, "and" is again a coordinating conjunction, but the two events described are not separate: we understand that John is free *as a result* of the prison cell being opened. Even though the two clauses are grammatically co-ordinate, in terms of meaning, the second is actually dependent on the first!

Thinking "laterally", we can see that these two examples are actually analogous to the two translation options, 1 and 2, given in Figure 1.

### End of Excursus No. 1

Are there any English translations that *clearly* support Option 2?

Indeed there are! Here, for example, is the NIV translation of Romans 15:8-9a:

“For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth,  
to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs  
so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy,”

Does this “reading” fully “represent” Option 2, or are there other possibilities?

I think there are two main possibilities! Here’s another excursus!

### Excursus No. 2

Please consider the following two sentences . . .

First sentence (which we’ve already encountered!):

“Following the victory, the governor opened John’s prison cell, and John was a free man”.

Here, as before, we have two clauses joined by the coordinating conjunction “and”. What is the relationship in meaning between these two clauses? Well, I think that the two clauses are describing the same event from two different points of view: there is nothing “extra” in the first clause that is not “taken up” in the second clause. We could replace the word “and” with something like “and, as a consequence . . .” or “so that . . .” to get approximately the same meaning.

Now let’s compare this with the following sentence:

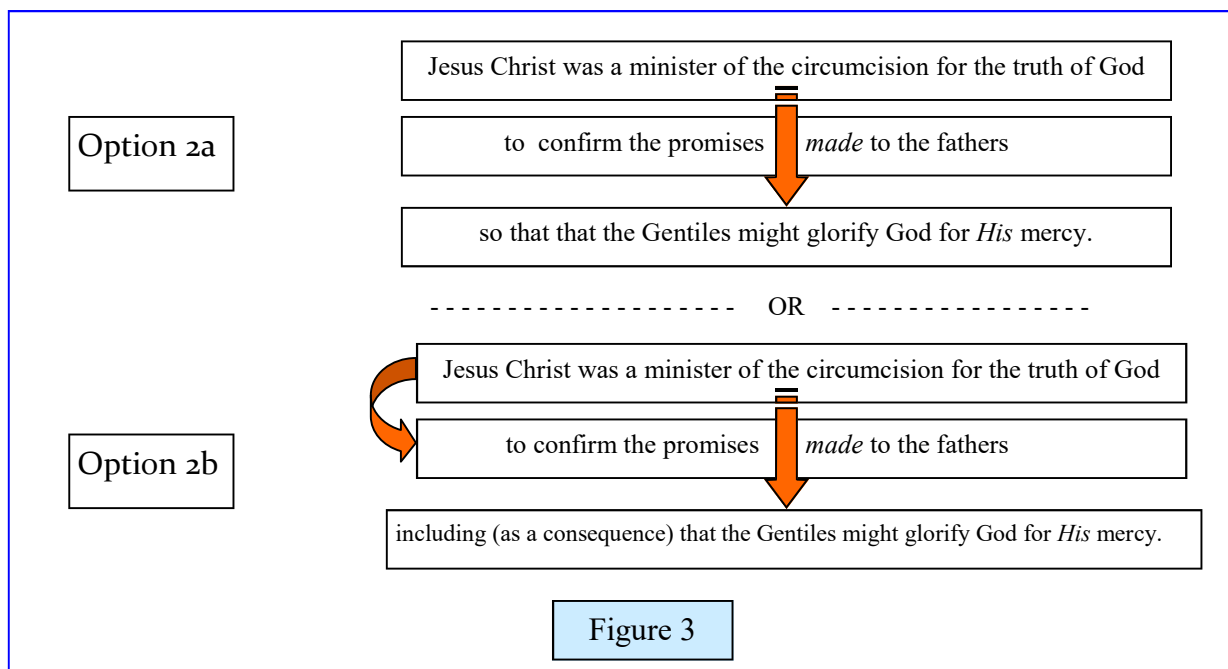
“Following the victory, the new governor released all the prisoners and John was a free man.”

Here, I think that there really is an “extra” in the first clause that is not “taken up” in the second clause—namely the release of all the other prisoners! Here, the second clause takes up just one result of the governor’s action, but it doesn’t mention the other result or results.

Now these are different examples, but both simply use the word “and” to connect the two clauses.

### End of Excursus No. 2

By analogy, again, this gives us two possible ways of understanding Romans 15:8-9a according to Option 2. Let’s represent these in diagrammatic form (Figure 3, overleaf):



Now, as I read Option 2a in Figure 3, the passage *seems* initially to me to be saying that the purpose of Christ becoming a servant to the Circumcision was so that the Gentiles would glorify God—the confirming of the patriarchal promises being a sort of “stepping stone” for that purpose, rather than having, or also having, an independent importance. This corresponds to the governor opening John’s prison cell with the result that John is now free.

However, option 2b, says that Christ’s servanthood confirmed the promises to the patriarchs and also that this confirmation of the promises included or produced as one of its consequences the glorifying of God by the Gentiles.

Well, which, if any, of all of these is most likely the best translation?

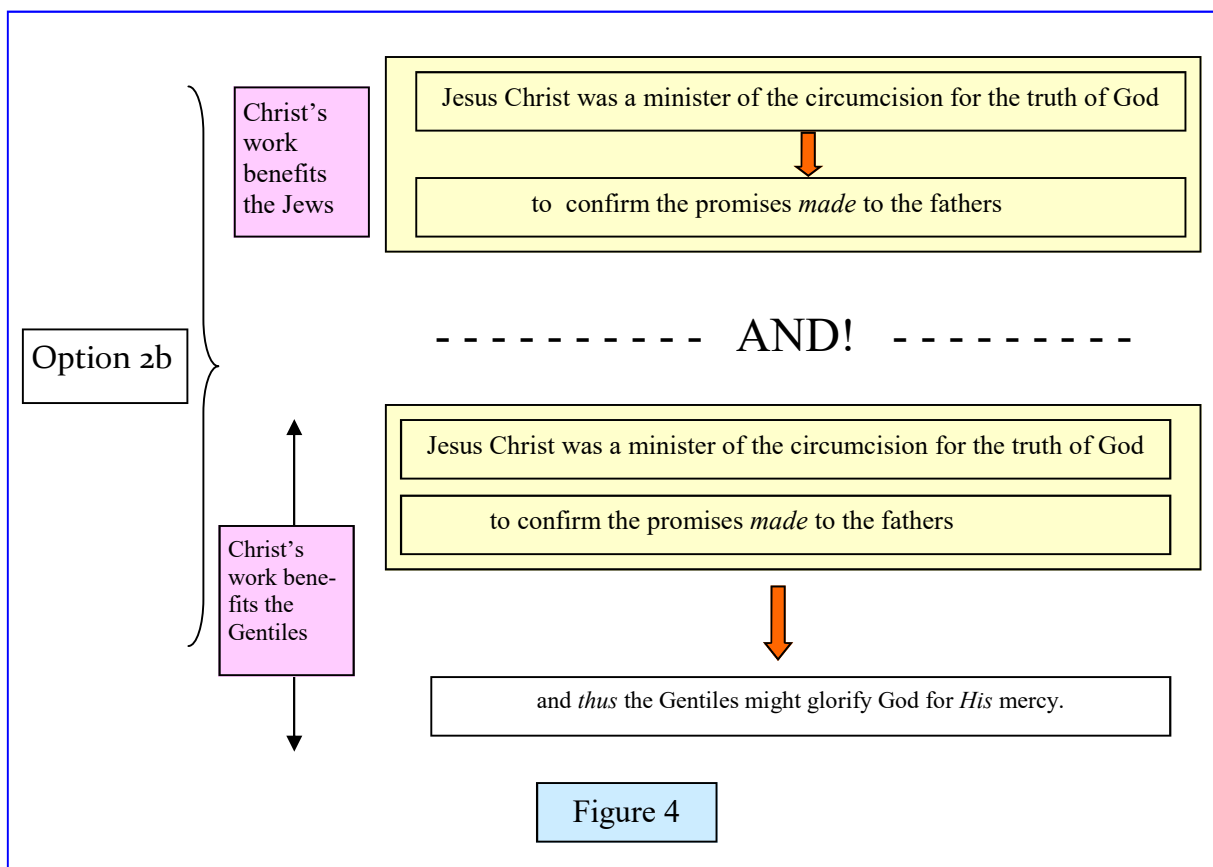
I currently think, and will be arguing, that Option 2b is probably what Paul intended. One of the reasons for this is that the promises to the fathers included benefits for both Jews and Gentiles. (“I will make of you a great nation and in you will all the nations of the earth be blessed”) - something which Paul stresses both in Romans and Galatians.

Option 1a (in Figure 1) fails to affirm that blessing to the Gentiles is included within the promises, and Option 2a seems to me to by-pass the importance of the confirmation of the promises for the Jews—the importance of the promises, according to this option, lying in the fact that, through the promises, the Gentiles are blessed.

One of the lines of reasoning that I will be following is that these verses can be understood as a Christological “template” for the behaviour of the “strong” (predominantly Gentiles) towards the “weak” (predominantly Jews) in the church at Rome. Option 2a,

by “minimising” Christ’s purpose in benefitting the Jews themselves through His servanthood, does not provide the necessary motive for the Gentiles to act “Christologically” - in fact, as a template, Option 2a comes across as rather “self-serving”: the strong act Christologically towards the weak, so that they themselves (i.e. the “strong”) will benefit!!

Finally, in this introduction, I would like to re-state the Option 2b in a way that emphasises the proposed “two-fold” nature of what I think is likely Paul’s argument here—namely benefits to both Jew and Gentile through Christ’s confirming of the patriarchal promises. This is shown in Figure 4:



This understanding appears to be in line with N. T. Wright’s (much more succinct!) comment in his excellent commentary on Romans (in the *New Interpreters’ Bible Commentary Vol. X*) to which I am greatly indebted. Commenting on Verses 8-9a he says,

“Paul has the ancient promises in mind once more. But here, as there [referring to Rom. 3:4,7 S.F.] these promises were never simply for ethnic Israel; nor were they divided, with one part belonging to Israel and the other to the nations. The promises were both *to* Israel and *through* Israel to the world.”

Well, I think that’s probably enough for this article! In the next articles, I hope to see whether grammatical and structural considerations, as well as further contextual and

theological considerations, will help to establish Option 2b, or whether some of the (many!) other proposed translations should be preferred, and also, how Option 2b, if accepted, might best be translated into English: after all, all the options we have looked at so far simply use the connecting word “and” (as in the AV) which therefore appears to be a true translation as far as it goes, but which lacks the necessary specificity and precision to eliminate meanings which were not intended.