

“IN THIS WAY ALL ISRAEL WILL BE SAVED”: A STUDY OF ROMANS 11:26¹

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Introduction

AS MUCH AS any aspect of theology, the arena of biblical eschatology has been a battleground of competing views throughout the last two centuries. In the history of Christian theology, interest in questions of eschatology has been intermittent. However, in the last century or more, it would be no exaggeration to say that eschatology became and continues to be one of the principal topics for debate among interpreters of the Scriptures.

Perhaps one of the most controversial and lively topics within the orbit of eschatology is the question of the future of Israel. Not only with the emergence of dispensational premillennialism as an influential viewpoint within North American evangelicalism, but also with the establishment of the nation of Israel in 1948, a great deal of renewed interest has been devoted to God’s purposes regarding his ancestral people.² Among Christians generally, it is not uncommon to find the question of Israel being posed, though the answers proffered are often widely divergent and inadequately warranted by an appeal to biblical or theological arguments. While it will not be my concern in what follows to detail the history of the church’s reflection upon the subject of God’s purposes for Israel, it almost goes without saying that this has become one of the more disputed topics within the contemporary Christian church.

The focus of my treatment of this question in this article will be upon Romans 11, especially verse 26, where the apostle Paul concludes a lengthy treatment of God’s saving intention with respect to Israel. This passage is generally acknowledged to be the most important New Testament evidence that bears directly upon the question of God’s purpose for Israel in the history of redemption. While there would be value in considering the history of the interpretation of this passage, we will treat it directly and offer an interpretation of its teaching against the background of contemporary debates. However, before we take up the argument in Romans 11, and particularly the meaning of Paul’s language in verse 26, we need to review some broad biblical themes which provide a kind of biblical framework for the interpretation of this passage. A review of these themes will locate our discussion of Romans 11:26 in the broader framework of biblical eschatology.

1. This article represents a revised and expanded version of an earlier treatment of the question of “all Israel” in my book, *The Promise of the Future* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 127-39.

2. For general treatments of the topic of Israel and the church that are written from a Reformed perspective, see David Holwerda, *Jesus & Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995); and O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2000).

I. The “Signs of the Times”

In eschatology, it has become commonplace to speak of the “signs of the times” to refer to those events that characterize history in the inter-advental period between Christ’s first coming and his coming at the end or consummation of the age. The great event on the horizon, so far as biblical eschatology is concerned, is the event known as the second coming of Christ, when he will judge the living and the dead. The language of the “signs of the times” is often used to designate those features of the history of redemption that mark the period leading up to the return of Christ. Despite the rather common use of this expression in modern discussion, it is found in only one place in the New Testament, Matthew 16:1. Interestingly, in this passage the phrase refers not so much to future events but to events already present. In Matthew 16:1 the Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus asking him to show them “a sign from heaven” (ESV). Jesus responded, “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but cannot interpret the signs of the times?” (τὸ μὲν πρόσωπον τοῦ οὐρανοῦ γινώσκετε διακρίνειν, τὰ δὲ σημεῖα τῶν καιρῶν οὐ δύνασθε). In his answer to the request of the Pharisees and Sadducees, Jesus is referring to the works of God that disclose his will and purpose, like the deeds listed in Matthew 11:5, confirming that Jesus was the promised Christ: “the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”

Though the Scriptures do not use the phrase “the signs of the times” specifically to signify the nature of the inter-advental period prior to Christ’s return, it is not difficult to understand how the expression came to be used in this way. Just as certain signs in the past history of redemption disclosed and confirmed God’s purpose, so certain signs in this present age point to Christ’s coming again. The expression, “the signs of the times,” serves as theological shorthand to designate those events which the Word of God says confirm that history is moving towards the day of the Lord. They are indicators that Christ will come as he promised, and reminders that he is seated at the Father’s right hand, ruling all things for the sake of his church and bringing history to its appointed end.

In popular usage, these “signs of the times” are often restricted to a few events that will only occur immediately prior to Christ’s return. However, in biblical teaching a variety of signs are identified, many of which span the whole period between Christ’s ascension into heaven and his coming again, including some that took place already at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70. For example, the rich diversity of signs mentioned in Matthew 24, Mark 13, and Luke 21 cannot be accommodated by the idea that they all must occur in the period shortly before Christ’s second coming. Nor do these signs permit us to date the exact time of Christ’s return. Too often Scriptural prophecies regarding these signs are read as though they were newspaper reports on events in the future, written with exact chronological detail.³ The signs of the times, however, do not afford an exact timetable for Christ’s return. Another assumption that often plagues our understanding of “the signs of the times” is that they are always abnormal, catastrophic and

3. Cf. G.C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 244, who warns against what he calls a reportorial view of these signs that allows us to predict the exact time and circumstances immediately prior to Christ’s return.

spectacular.⁴ The tendency is often to think of unusual circumstances that will characterize history before Christ's return such as wars, rumors of wars, earthquakes, the Antichrist, and Armageddon. Not only do these signs allow us to ascertain the imminence of Christ's coming, but they also are signs that are unusual and striking.

Contrary to these popular opinions regarding the "signs of the times," it is important to observe that the signs spoken of in Scripture often refer as much to the history of God's dealings with his people in the past and have antecedents in the Old Testament. Many signs are also presently occurring in what we might think of as "ordinary" history. All of them call the people of God to constant vigilance and a hope-filled anticipation of the future in the purpose of God. Though they do not permit us to date the return of Christ, they are still signs of that return and are closely related to it. Whenever New Testament passages speak of various events that will take place during the course of history, they speak of them as indicators that the end is drawing near. They remind the believer that history is moving toward its appointed goal, the revelation of Christ and the consummation of the kingdom of God. Another feature often present in the Bible's delineation of "the signs of the times" is the stress upon the antithesis between the kingdom of God and the powers of evil. As history moves forward under the lordship of Jesus Christ, this antithesis becomes increasingly evident and the certain triumph of Christ's cause is foreshadowed. Finally, "the signs of the times" remind believer and unbeliever alike that today is the day of salvation. They call believers to constant watchfulness. Christ said to his disciples, "therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming" (Matt. 24:42). They also call believers to be prepared for the coming of the heavenly bridegroom, Jesus Christ, who will receive his bride unto himself and cast his enemies into everlasting destruction (2 Thess. 1:6-10).

Thus, it is within the broad framework of these so-called "signs of the times" that our question regarding the future of Israel naturally arises. In his important study, *The Bible and the Future*, Anthony Hoekema offers a useful description of the kinds of signs that will mark the period between Christ's first and second coming.⁵ According to Hoekema, these signs may be considered under three categories: first, signs of the present working and eventual triumph of God's grace (the preaching of the gospel, the salvation of "all Israel"); second, signs of the antithesis, the intensifying conflict between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdom of the Antichrist (tribulation, the Great Tribulation, apostasy, the Antichrist); and third, signs of God's present judgment anticipating the great judgment (wars and rumors of wars, famine and earthquakes, the battle of Armageddon). The question of the future of Israel within the redemptive purposes of God belongs, accordingly, to the broader question of those events that will signal the progress of history under God's sovereign superintendence in Christ and by his Spirit in this present age.

From the vantage point of the biblical understanding of the "signs of the times," the question regarding the meaning of "all Israel" in Romans 11:26 may be expressed more precisely: does the New Testament teach that, among the events that will portend the progress of redemptive history in the period

4. For example, Abraham Kuyper, in his *Dictaten Dogmatiek*, 2nd ed., vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: J. B. Hulst, n.d.), "Locus de Consummatione Saeculi," 136ff., maintains that what distinguishes these signs is their extraordinary quality or abnormality.

5. *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 137.

prior to the consummation of the present age, the salvation of Israel, God's ancestral people, will be an event of special significance?

II. Have the Gentile Nations Displaced Israel in the Present Age?

Before we turn our attention to Romans 11, which addresses this question in a particularly striking manner, it is instructive to observe how it is often assumed that the salvation of the Gentile nations has displaced the salvation of Israel as the focus of God's redemptive purposes in the present age. This assumption is not difficult to explain. Since many of the people of Israel responded in unbelief to Christ's ministry and the preaching of the apostles, the missionary proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom was increasingly extended to the Gentile nations. In contrast to the relatively small number among the children of Israel who became members of the new covenant community, the church of Jesus Christ, the number of Gentile believers became increasingly predominant.

Over time many took this pattern to mean that God's redemptive purposes for Israel had concluded, and that the Gentile peoples were now the peculiar, almost exclusive, focus of his saving work through Jesus Christ. Though the Christian church never embraced the sharp distinction between God's respective purposes for Israel, as an ethnic people, and for the church, as a predominantly Gentile community, in the manner of modern dispensationalism, an almost-dispensational view emerged which assumed that God's redemptive purpose for Israel had concluded in the present age. Since the church is the new "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16; 1 Pet. 3:9-10), any particular attention to the salvation of Israel in distinction from the Gentiles is regarded as problematic.

The problem with this assumption, however, is that it militates against something that we will discover in our examination of Romans 11. The apostle Paul, who was uniquely an apostle to the Gentiles, seems to have an abiding interest in the question of God's sovereign purpose of redemption for his ancestral people, Israel. For Paul, the salvation of Gentile believers within God's electing purpose does not eclipse any further interest in the question of the future of Israel. Indeed, for Paul the contrast between the unbelief of Israel and the salvation of the Gentiles poses the question of Israel's future in the most poignant manner. To appreciate why this is so, we have to take note of the Old Testament promises regarding the future unfolding of God's purpose for the salvation of his people. These promises include a future when the blessings of the covenant will be extended to all the families of the earth. But they also include the promise of a future restoration and salvation for Israel, to whom the nations will be joined.

The promises of the Old Testament clearly include the anticipation of an age when the gospel would go to all nations.⁶ From the beginning of the Lord's dealings with his covenant people, his promise of salvation included blessings for all the families and nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3). Genesis 12 is commonly regarded as describing the formal establishment of the covenant

6. See Johannes Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church: A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (1962; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 15-54, for a comprehensive survey of the Old Testament's promise of the mission of God to all the nations.

of grace and harks back to the Lord's original promise to Eve that her seed would crush the head of the serpent (Gen. 3:15). Later, Abraham was promised a great reward (Gen. 15:1), an heir through whom the Lord's grace would extend to all peoples. When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord promised: "I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Gen. 17:7).

Accordingly, the Lord's gracious dealings with Israel set the stage in the history of redemption for the eventual extension of gospel blessings to all families of the earth. However much this scope of God's saving purpose may have been sinfully suppressed among the Old Testament people of God, it is basic to an understanding of redemptive history leading up to the sending of the Messiah. Not only is the promise of salvation for all people repeated subsequently in the book of Genesis (see Gen. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14), but it is also illustrated throughout the Old Testament by the inclusion of non-Israelites among the people of God (Rahab, Ruth, household servants, and aliens).

It is remarkable to see how the inclusion of the nations is celebrated throughout the Psalter (for example, Ps. 8; 19:1-4; 67:4; 103:19). Psalm 24:1 declares that "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein." The rule of the promised king in the line of David will be a rule over all the earth (see Ps. 72:19). The worship of the Lord included frequent rejoicing in his certain triumph over all his enemies (Ps. 47:2; 77:13; 136:2), the call to make him known among the nations (Ps. 9:11; 108:3), and the invitation to the nations to join in the worship of the Lord (Ps. 50:4; 87; 98:4; 113:3; 117). Among these invitations, none is more powerful than Psalm 96:7: "Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength!" The language of the Psalter echoes and re-echoes the promise that the Lord intends to make himself known among all the nations and extend his covenant blessings to every people.

The announcement of the Lord's coming and the salvation of the nations is reiterated in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament. Though there are many facets to this announcement, all are centered in the conviction that the Lord will come to judge the nations in righteousness and grant salvation to all peoples (cf. Ps. 59:5; 82:1, 8; 96:13). The day of the Lord, though variously described and understood, promises the outpouring of the Spirit of the Lord upon all flesh (Joel 2:28). Isaiah eloquently announces that "in the latter days ... the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains ... and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come ..." (Isa. 2:1-4; 44:8; 66:19). Zechariah proclaims a similar announcement (Zech. 8:18-23). A new day is promised in which all the nations will see the glory of the Lord and enter into the enjoyment of full salvation. The seed of the woman, the son of Abraham, will come, and in him the blessings of the covenant will be imparted to every family and people.

Only within this Old Testament setting is it possible to appreciate the significance of the New Testament fulfillment. The preaching of the gospel to the nations, mandated by Christ in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20), is an end-time fulfillment of the Lord's earlier promise. Though this is not often adequately appreciated, it is really a striking development in the history of redemption. The preaching of the gospel that is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16), is one of the clearest signs that we live in the last days of redemptive

history, days in which God's promises are being fulfilled and the triumph of his covenant grace in Christ is being manifested.

This is explicitly taught in the New Testament Gospels. In Matthew 24, we are told that the disciples came to Jesus and asked what would be the sign of Christ's coming and the end of the age. Jesus mentioned a number of signs, among them wars and rumors of wars, famines and earthquakes, and tribulation and apostasy. Especially prominent among these signs, however, is the preaching of the gospel: "And this gospel of the kingdom," Christ announces, "will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (verse 14; see also Mark 13:10). Jesus clearly affirms that preaching is a sign that must precede the end of the age and the return of the Son of Man. The New Testament preaching of the gospel of the kingdom is linked with the Old Testament promises of blessing for all nations in the end times. The Great Commission of Matthew 28 breathes the spirit of the Lord's original covenant promise with Abraham. When Christ tells the disciples to go and make disciples of all the nations, this is certainly a fulfillment of the promise to Abraham. The same emphasis upon the preaching of the gospel to all the nations is seen in parallel passages in the Gospels of Mark (16:15-16) and Luke (24:46-49).

That the preaching of the gospel marks off this period as the last days is also evident in the book of Acts, which records Christ's ministry through the apostles in establishing the New Testament church. At Pentecost, the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit was expressed especially in the powerful preaching of the gospel of Christ (Acts 2). Acts traces the marvelous advancement of the gospel in the power and presence of the Spirit, beginning at Jerusalem but extending to the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:8). Similarly in the New Testament Epistles, it is evident that the apostles understood their preaching in this way (see 1 Pet. 2:6-10). Frequently, the preaching of the gospel, though to the world a thing of foolishness and weakness, is regarded as a demonstration of the Spirit and of power (1 Cor. 1:18-31; 2:4-5). Consequently, the apostles in their preaching exhibited not a spirit of fear and timidity but a Spirit of power (1 Cor. 4:20; 1 Thess. 1:5; 2 Cor. 4:7). The mystery of Christ, hidden through the centuries but now revealed in the fullness of time, includes God's invincible purpose to save an elect people from every tribe and tongue and people and nation (Eph. 1:3-14). This purpose will be fulfilled through the ministry of the gospel of reconciliation in Christ.

However, though the Old Testament promises a future outpouring of blessing upon the nations and peoples of the earth, it must be observed that these promises do not exclude the people of Israel. Nowhere does the Old Testament suggest that the salvation of the Gentile nations will occur in such a way that the people of Israel will be left behind or forgotten. Rather, the Old Testament promises of a future incorporation of all the peoples of the earth include the promise of a restoration and salvation of the people of Israel. We will have occasion to observe in our treatment of Romans 9-11, the most important New Testament passage about God's purposes regarding Israel, that this promise of Israel's restoration forms an important context for the apostle Paul's argument in these chapters.

The Old Testament promise was not that God would forsake his people Israel, substituting the other nations as the object of his saving love, but that he would include all the nations under the canopy of his saving mercy. The Lord's promise to Israel was that through her, and not apart from her, the promise would be extended to all peoples. This promise was confirmed

throughout the history of the Lord's dealings with his old covenant people, whenever non-Israelites or aliens were gathered into and numbered among the people of God. However particular and limited the Lord's dealings may have been with a special nation, Israel, his purpose was never limited to this nation. It should not surprise us, therefore, that the Lord's promise regarding a future gathering of the Gentile nations was joined to his promise of the salvation of Israel. His people Israel remained at the center of the future realization of his purposes of salvation. When, for example, Psalm 22 speaks of the future day in which "all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord, and all the families of the nations shall worship before you" (verse 27), this will be in the company of "all you offspring of Jacob ... [and] all you offspring of Israel" (verse 23). The blessing that falls upon Israel will be the means whereby the Lord's salvation will be made known among all the nations (Psa. 67). The announcement of salvation to Zion will take place in the sight of all the nations, that all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God (Isa. 52:7, 10). In the future day of the Lord's coming to save his people, the nations are described as coming to the light of Zion, and kings are said to come to "the brightness of your rising" (Isa. 60:1-3). Therefore, the future for Israel held the prospect not only of the gathering of the nations and peoples to Zion but also of her restoration to renewed fellowship and favor with the Lord.

III. The Future of Israel: "And So All Israel Shall Be Saved"

We have devoted some attention to these general biblical themes before turning to Romans 11, because they provide a context for understanding the question that the apostle Paul seeks to answer in this chapter and the chapters preceding it. What we have described as the Old Testament promises regarding the salvation of the nations and the future of Israel constitutes the background to the apostle Paul's argument in Romans 11. All these Old Testament promises regarding the future of Israel form a Scriptural context within which to understand the great question with which the apostle Paul wrestles in Romans 9-11: "Has God rejected his people?" (11:1). In these chapters, we have an extended New Testament commentary on the question of God's purposes in the history of redemption with respect to the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles. Due to the importance of this section of the book of Romans and the argument in Roman 11 especially, we will turn in the remainder of this article to an examination of how the apostle Paul treats the question of the future of Israel in this passage.

1. *The Problem Posed in Romans 9:1-6*

To understand the argument of these chapters, at least the part addressed to God's redemptive purpose for Israel, it is necessary to begin with a clear understanding of the problem posed in Romans 9:1-6, which constitutes the occasion for the apostle Paul's lengthy exposition of God's redemptive purposes, not only for the Gentiles, but especially for the people of Israel. Put concisely, the problem Paul addresses is whether the Word and promise of God regarding Israel have failed.

This problem arises within the setting of the apostle Paul's resounding conclusion and confident affirmation in Romans 8. Having set forth the mer-

cy and grace of God in the salvation of his people in Christ through faith, the apostle exults that nothing will be able to separate those who have been called according to God's purpose and electing grace from his love in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:28-39). Paul's song of confidence in God's grace and redemptive purpose seems almost to be the conclusion to which the entire argument in Romans 1-8 has been leading. Though all people are by nature sinners, deserving of the wrath and judgment of God, a way of salvation is provided for all who believe in Jesus Christ. Though the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18-32), and though "none is righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10), the grace and mercy of God in the free justification and salvation of sinners is the hope of all believers. Romans 8 concludes, therefore, with a climactic affirmation of the victory of God's grace in Christ for all who believe.

However, this confidence in God's grace in Christ raises an inescapable problem for the apostle Paul. How can he exult in the triumph of God's grace in Christ through faith, when this grace seems to be of so little effect among the people of Israel in his day? If God's purposes and promises regarding Israel have terminated in failure and unbelief, how can he say that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation to the Jew first and also to the Greek? Indeed, if God's Word has failed with respect to Israel, can he (and we) have confidence that God's promises will not likewise fail in regard to the Gentiles? This is the great and perplexing problem that presses in upon the apostle at the outset of Romans 9-11, as the opening words of chapter 9 eloquently attest:

I am telling the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and unceasing grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen (Rom. 9:1-5).

The question, then, to which the entire argument of Romans 9-11 is addressed, is whether the Word and promise of God have failed due to the apparent unbelief of many of the children of Israel.

2. *The General Resolution of Romans 9 & 10*

To this troublesome question, the general answer of the apostle Paul throughout these chapters is a resounding "no." This is developed at some length in chapters 9 and 10, first in terms in Paul's appeal to God's purpose of election, which discriminates between the children of Israel who are "children of the promise" (τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἐπαγγελίας, 9:8) and those who are not, and second in terms of the unbelief of many of the people of Israel. These chapters emphatically assert that the Word of God has in no wise failed in the face of the unbelief of many of Paul's kinsmen according to the flesh. Rather, just as had been the case in the previous history of redemption, God's purpose according to election (ἡ κατ' ἐκλογὴν πρόθεσις τοῦ θεοῦ) has been and is being realized (9:11). Just as that purpose of election discriminated between some who were children of Israel only according to the flesh, and others who

were true children according to the promise and purpose of God, so that purpose of election continues to be realized in the salvation of some and not others.

Thus, the apostle Paul answers generally the question regarding the supposed failure of God's Word and promise by arguing that throughout the whole history of the Lord's dealings with his people Israel, some were brought to salvation and others were hardened in their unbelief according to God's purpose of election. At no time in this history did God's purpose ever fail in any way or fall short of being realized. He also argues at some length in Romans 9:30ff. through chapter 10 that the reason for the failure of many Israelites to be saved through Christ lies in their unbelieving efforts to obtain salvation, not in the way of faith, but upon the basis of works (9:30-10:4). Though many of the children of Israel were zealous for God, their zeal was not according to knowledge. Rather than submitting to God's righteousness, which is revealed through Christ who is the "end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (τέλος γὰρ νόμου Χριστός εἰς δικαιοσύνην παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι, 10:4), they sought to establish their own righteousness in obedience to the law. Consequently, the prophecy of Isaiah has been fulfilled, namely, that Christ has become to them a "stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense" (λίθον προσκόμματος καὶ πέτραν σκανδάλου, 9:33). The way of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike is the same: only those who, upon hearing the Word of the gospel preached, believe with their heart and call upon the name of the Lord, will be saved.

Though it is not necessary for our purpose to trace out all of the steps in the apostle's argument in chapters 9 and 10, it is evident that his initial response to the question posed by Israel's unbelief and apostasy is to appeal to God's electing grace and purpose, which have not and cannot fail. In the language the apostle uses at the outset of chapter 11, there has always been a "remnant, chosen by grace" (λείμμα κατ' ἐκλογὴν χάριτος γέγονεν, 11:5) from among the broader company of the children of Israel. Despite this rather abbreviated statement of the general resolution to the question presented in this passage, it is not difficult to capture the gist of the apostle's answer to it. In the whole course of the history of redemption, God has been working out his electing purpose. This purpose is the only basis for the salvation of some from the entire number of the children of Israel in the past. It is also the only basis for the salvation of any, whether Jew or Gentile, in the present and the future. We can be certain of one thing: the apostle is insisting that God's purpose of election has not failed in the past, is not failing in the present, and will certainly not fail in the future. All those whom God has chosen to save in Christ will unfailingly be saved.

3. *The Particular Resolution of Romans 11: "All Israel Will Be Saved"*

Paul's answer to the enigma of the unbelief of many of his kinsmen, however, does not conclude at the end of chapter 10. At the close of chapter 10, he intimates that the salvation through faith in Christ that is being granted to the Gentiles will have consequences for the children of Israel. Quoting Moses in Deuteronomy 32:21, Paul notes that God's saving power among the Gentiles will serve to provoke Israel to "jealousy," intimating that this jealousy may be the occasion for a renewed turning to the Lord in faith.

Though chapter 10 ends on a sobering note—the Lord has been found by those who did not seek him, as Isaiah formerly prophesied, but among Israel there has been a persistent disobedience to the Lord’s gracious overtures—chapter 11 continues to address the problem of Israel’s unbelief and offers a resolution that goes beyond the argument of chapters 9 and 10. Paul’s most direct resolution of the problem of Israel’s apostasy is developed at some length in this chapter, and therefore we must give it our careful attention. This chapter leads to the critical conclusion set forth in verse 26, “And in this way all Israel will be saved” (καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται), a conclusion that provokes the apostle to burst forth in a doxology of praise to God for the depth of the riches of both his wisdom and knowledge (11:33).

Three Views of “All Israel”

In order to interpret what the apostle Paul means in Romans 11:26, we need to follow carefully the steps in his argument throughout chapter 11, which lead him to the striking conclusion, “[a]nd in this way all Israel will be saved” (καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται). The critical question that we will face is the precise meaning of this expression, particularly the language, “all Israel.” Before we trace out the argument in chapter 11, however, it should be noted that there are, broadly speaking, three views regarding the meaning of “all Israel” that have been advanced throughout the history of interpretation of this passage.⁷

The first view takes this phrase to refer to the people of Israel as a totality (though not necessarily every individual Jew) who will be converted at some time after the fullness of the Gentiles has been gathered. Among those who take this view, three distinct forms of it are often defended: first, dispensational interpreters link this conversion of Israel as a totality with God’s special program for the Jews in the future millennium;⁸ second, premillennial interpreters who are not dispensationalists understand it to refer to a future conversion of the Jewish nation toward the close of the present period of redemptive history prior to the future millennium of Revelation 20;⁹ and third, some interpreters who are neither dispensationalists nor premillennialists take it to refer to a future conversion of the people of Israel, not as a separate nation or people, but as a large company of those among the Jewish people who will be joined to the church.¹⁰ In all of the various forms of this view, it

7. For a good, more detailed summary of the primary interpretations of the phrase, “and in this way all Israel will be saved,” see J. A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33 (New York, Doubleday, 1993), 619-20.

8. For a presentation and defence of the dispensational form of this view, see John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1959), 167-92; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come*, (Findlay, OH: Dunham, 1958), 504-7; and Michael G. Vanlaningham, “Romans 11:25-27 and the Future of Israel in Paul’s Thought,” *The Masters Seminary Journal* 3/3 (Fall 1992), 141-74.

9. For a presentation and defence of the premillennialist form of this view, see George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 561-3; Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, trans. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 78.

10. For a presentation and defence of this third form of the first view, see Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Philadelphia: Alfred Martien, 1873), *ad loc.*; S. Greijdanus, *De Brief Van Den Apostel Paulus Aan De Gemeente Te Rome*, vol. 2 (Amsterdam: H. A. Van Bottenburg, 1933), 515-17; John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. I (NICNT; 1959; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 91-103; G. Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Princeton: University Press, 1930), 89; Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), *ad loc.*; Keith A. Mathison, *Postmillennialism: An Eschatology of Hope* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1999), 121-30; and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Com-

is maintained that the fullness of Israel must refer to the special people of God who will be converted at some time in the future, as they are provoked to jealousy by the salvation of the Gentiles. In this view, the “all Israel” of Romans 11:26 is understood to refer to a future conversion of ethnic Israel within the redemptive purpose of God.

The second view takes this phrase to be a reference to the salvation of all the elect, Jew and Gentile alike, gathered through the preaching of the gospel in the whole course of the history of redemption. John Calvin, for example, took this position and argued that Israel here refers, not to a distinct people among the peoples of the earth, but to the people of God in the general and comprehensive sense, embracing Jew and Gentile alike.¹¹

The third view takes this phrase to be a reference to the total number of the elect from among the people of Israel. According to this view, the fullness of Israel refers to the sum total of the remnant of elect Jews whom God has gathered, is gathering, and will yet gather throughout the entire history of redemption until the time of Christ’s second coming.¹²

Throughout the following exposition of Paul’s argument in Romans 11, and especially the conclusion regarding “all Israel” in Romans 11:26, I will have occasion to interact with some of the arguments for these three views. However, engagement with these arguments will not be my primary aim. Rather, I will primarily aim to provide an exposition of Romans 11:26 that seems most in keeping with the flow of the argument of the apostle throughout this important chapter, which offers an extended answer to the question whether God’s Word has failed with respect to Israel.

Verses 1-10: The Salvation of a “Remnant” Within Israel

[1] I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. [2]

mentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 612-23. Though many defenders of this position are postmillennialists, this position is not as such a sufficient condition for taking a postmillennialist view for the kingdom.

11. *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (*Calvin’s New Testament Commentaries*, 1960; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 255. Interestingly, this interpretation, which has had advocates throughout the history of the church, is also the one adopted by N.T. Wright in his commentary on the book of Romans. See N.T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans*, vol. 10: *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Leander E. Keck, gen. ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 688-95.

12. Cf. Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 139-47, who provides an able defence of this view. Others who take this view include: Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4: *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 668-72; L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 698-700; William Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974), 39-52; idem, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980, 1981), 379-82; H. Ridderbos, *Paul*, 354-61; O. Palmer Robertson, “Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?” in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. K.S. Kantzer and S.N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 209-27; Robert B. Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in *Three Views of the Millennium and Beyond*, ed. Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 112-18. Robertson, *The Israel of God*, 167-92, offers a slightly revised version of his earlier argument for this position. In his revised article, Robertson ultimately regards “all Israel” to refer to the whole church of God, the one olive tree, comprised of elect Jews and Gentiles. Consequently, his present position seems closer to that of Calvin than the other views I have identified. In this article, Robertson also identifies at least five different interpretations of “all Israel”: (1) all ethnic descendants of Abraham, (2) all ethnic descendants of Abraham living when God initiates a special working among the Jewish people, (3) the mass or at least the majority of Jews living at the time of a special saving activity of God, (4) all elect Israelites within the community of Israel, or (5) both Jews and Gentiles who together constitute the church of Christ, the Israel of God” (183).

God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? [3] "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." [4] But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." [5] So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. [6] But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace. [7] What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, [8] as it is written, "God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see and ears that would not hear, down to this very day." [9] And David says, "Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them; [10] let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.

In these opening verses of chapter 11, the apostle brings to the fore again the question with which he is engaged throughout this section of the book of Romans: are we to conclude from the unbelief of many of the children of Israel that God has “rejected” or “cast off” (ἀπώσατο) his people?¹³ In typical fashion, he uses an expression, “by no means!” (μὴ γένοιτο; cf. Rom. 3:4, 6, 31; 6:2, 15; 7:7, 13; 9:14), that strongly denies that this is the case. In his earlier response to this question in Romans 9:6ff., Paul had emphasized the sovereign grace, and especially the justice of God, in the salvation of an elect remnant from among the people of Israel. In the opening verses of chapter 11, he repeats the emphasis upon God’s sovereign and gracious election of some of the children of Israel. But he does so in a way that underscores the fact that the non-salvation of many unbelieving Israelites in no way means that God has rejected them. Indeed, Paul himself is a confirmation of God’s grace and faithfulness toward Israel, since he is “an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin” (καὶ γὰρ ἐγὼ Ἰσραηλῆτης εἰμί, ἐκ σπέρματος Ἀβραάμ, φυλῆς Βενιαμίν, 11:1).

After emphatically rejecting the possibility that the unbelief of many Israelites means that they have been rejected by God, Paul proceeds to adduce the example of the preservation of a remnant during the days of Elijah the prophet. We may be sure that God has not rejected the people whom he “foreknew” and set apart for himself, because God has preserved today a “remnant, chosen by grace” (λείμμα κατ’ ἐκλογὴν χάριτος, 11:5) even as he did in the days of Elijah. When Elijah appealed to the Lord against the people of Israel in their apostasy, the Lord reminded him that he had graciously and sovereignly preserved seven thousand who had not bowed their knee to Baal. According to Paul, this preservation of a remnant of Israel during the days of Elijah constitutes a kind of parallel to his own day in which there is an analogous situation. Even though many of his kinsmen are unbelieving, the conclusion does not follow that God has abandoned his people. There remains a remnant, including Paul himself, whom God has graciously saved through faith in Jesus Christ. The salvation of this remnant constitutes clear evidence that the Lord has not cast off or rejected his people.

Toward the close of this opening section of chapter 11, the apostle raises pointedly the question, “what then?” (Τί οὖν, 11:7).” This language indicates that he now wants either to draw a conclusion from the preceding or to explore the implications of his preceding argument in another, related area.

13. The language Paul uses here is reminiscent of Old Testament passages that teach that God will not cast off his people (e.g., 1 Sam. 12:22; Psa. 94:14; Jer. 31:37). Cf. J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 66.

And the conclusion he draws is that the apostasy of Israel, though real, is not complete but partial. Whereas the “elect” among Israel have received God’s grace in Christ, the “rest were hardened” (οἱ δὲ λοιποὶ ἐπωρώθησαν, 11:7). Because many of the children of Israel have stumbled at the preaching of the gospel (cf. chapter 10:1-4), God has delivered them over to judgment.

The interesting feature of these opening verses of chapter 11 is that they do not seem to add anything new to the argument of the previous chapters. The apostle Paul reiterates his point that the unbelief and apostasy of many of his contemporary Israelites in no way cast doubt upon the faithfulness and power of God. For throughout the course of redemptive history, including his own day, the Lord has been gathering from among Israel an elect remnant. This remnant belies the conclusion that the unbelief of many of the people of Israel calls into question the power and truthfulness of the Lord’s promises. However, though these verses reiterate points made in the preceding chapters, they do offer a hint that Paul has not concluded his answer to the question whether God’s Word has failed in respect to Israel. Paul is not simply repeating himself, but offering a prelude to a further unfolding of God’s redemptive plan and purpose for Israel. That this is so becomes especially evident in the next section of the chapter.

Verses 11-24: The Salvation of the “Fullness” of Israel

[11] So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. [12] Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean! [13] Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry [14] in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. [15] For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

When we come to the second section of chapter 11, Paul’s handling of the question whether God has cast off his people Israel continues, but with a new wrinkle. Prior to these verses, the main burden of Paul’s case has been that the unbelief and disobedience of many of the Israelites did not characterize all. As in the past history of God’s dealings with his people, so in the present, there has always been a remnant according to God’s gracious purpose of election. The preservation of this remnant demonstrates that the Lord has not rejected his people. However, in verses 11-15 the apostle Paul adds a further point: *not only has the unbelief of Israel been partial, but it has also not been final*. The story of God’s gracious dealings and purpose with respect to Israel is not finished, and it is to this further story that Paul now turns his attention.

This section opens with a question, “did they stumble in order that they might fall?” (μή ἔπαισαν ἵνα πέσωσιν, 11:11). The sense of this question is: how was God’s purpose served or advanced through the stumbling and unbelief of many among the people of Israel? As in the opening verses of this chapter, the apostle Paul responds to his own rhetorical question with an emphatic, “by no means!” Whatever purpose was served by the apostasy and unbelief of the non-elect among Israel, it was not in order that Israel might fall. Another purpose, and one that the apostle proceeds to enunciate, was served by Israel’s falling: “through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as

to make Israel jealous” (ἀλλὰ τῷ αὐτῶν παραπτώματι ἡ σωτηρία τοῖς ἔθνεσιν εἰς τὸ παραζηλώσαι αὐτούς, 11:11). What the apostle had only hinted at in the closing section of chapter 10, when he cited the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 32:21 (“I will make them jealous with those who are no people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation”), is now made explicit. Within the overarching purposes of God, the unbelief of many Israelites was the occasion for the extension of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. What is more, by virtue of the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles, it was also God’s purpose that his people, Israel, should be provoked to jealousy.

Several features of the way the apostle Paul now returns to the question of the salvation of Israel are worthy of brief note here. First, the distinction between the Gentiles and ethnic Israel plays a governing role at this point, as it has throughout this section of Romans. From the outset of chapter 9 until this point, the recurring issue is the question of God’s salvific intention with respect to Israel as a distinct people. Paul does not argue, in other words, that the salvation of many of the Gentiles has eclipsed altogether any interest in the salvation of Israel as a peculiar and identifiable people in distinction from the Gentiles. Second, though Israel’s unbelief has played a special role in contributing to the coming of salvation to the Gentiles (v. 11), this does not, in Paul’s view, conclude Israel’s role in the unfolding of God’s redemptive purpose. There is no suggestion of a complete *displacement* of Israel by the Gentiles in the redemptive purposes of God. And third, Paul reintroduces and now emphasizes the role “jealousy” on Israel’s part will play in the further realization of God’s purpose. Witnessing the faith and salvation that has come to the Gentiles, particularly in the context of her own unbelief and loss, will cause the people of Israel to emulate the example of the Gentiles and thereby enjoy salvation, and not further loss.

At verse 12 the apostle begins a series of *a fortiori* (“how much more”) arguments that draw a connection between the salvation of the “riches” (πλοῦτος) of the Gentiles and the salvation of Israel. If Israel’s “trespass” was the occasion for the salvation of the Gentiles, “how much more will their full inclusion mean!” (πόσῳ μᾶλλον τὸ πλήρωμα αὐτῶν). The force of this “how much more” argument is that Israel’s stumbling and loss have served as the occasion within the course of redemptive history for the salvation of many of the Gentile peoples. But this is not the conclusion of the matter, since the salvation of the “fullness” (πλήρωμα) of Israel will mean even greater riches so far as the reach of the gospel of Jesus Christ is concerned. A contrast is drawn between Israel’s “trespass” (παράπτωμα), which the apostle has previously detailed in chapters 9 and 10, and her “fullness.” The language of “fullness” suggests the idea of “completion” or “plentitude,” and stands in marked contrast with the language of “trespass” and “loss.” It suggests the idea of the restoration of Israel to a state of faith and blessing, which contrasts with the present circumstance of the salvation of only a remnant. At the close of this section, the apostle reminds his readers of his peculiar ministry as an apostle to the Gentiles. His ministry to the Gentiles, he observes, is not at the expense of his interest in the salvation of his kinsmen. Indeed, he magnifies his ministry to the Gentiles “in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them” (εἴ πως παραζηλώσω μου τὴν σάρκα καὶ σώσω τινας ἐξ αὐτῶν, 11:14).

The last verse in this section is of special importance, since it introduces language that reinforces the contrast between Israel’s present trespass and her future fullness. The present “rejection” (ἡ ἀποβολή) of Israel, which has

been the occasion for the “reconciliation of the world” (καταλλαγή κόσμου), will not be final. Rather, the reconciliation of the world will be enriched by what the apostle now terms the “acceptance” of Israel (ἡ πρόσλημις, 11:15). The apostle offers in this verse a new kind of “how much more” argument: if Israel’s casting away was the occasion for the riches of the Gentiles and the reconciliation of the world, then Israel’s acceptance and life from the dead will mean even greater riches and blessing, so far as the reach of God’s saving purpose is concerned.

The striking expression, “life from the dead” (ζωὴ ἐκ νεκρῶν), contrasts markedly with the present circumstance of unbelief and the loss of blessing to the people of Israel. There is some dispute among interpreters regarding this language. Some argue that it can only be taken as a reference to the resurrection that will consummate and climax the history of redemption. It has, on this interpretation, a strictly eschatological complexion and refers, accordingly, to the conclusion of God’s redemptive purposes in the present age.¹⁴ Others argue that it refers to the “spiritual life” that will be granted to Israel at a future time when her present rejection will be displaced with a “conversion of the mass of Israel.”¹⁵ On either view, the language of the apostle in these verses clearly introduces the prospect of a change in circumstance, which contrasts with Israel’s present loss of blessing and salvation through her unbelief. The apostle Paul seems to be holding out in this section the prospect of God’s saving purpose with respect to Israel as one that will eventuate in her more rich and full salvation.

Verses 16-24: The Re-engrafting of the Natural Branches

[16] If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches. [17] But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, [18] do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. [19] Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” [20] That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. [21] For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. [22] Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God’s kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. [23] And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. [24] For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

The apostle Paul follows up his address to his Gentile readers in the previous verses with an extended treatment of the analogy of the church as an “olive tree” (τῆς ἐλαίας, 11:17). After a short comparison of the church to the dough that is consecrated to the Lord (cf. Num. 15:17-21), the apostle compares the church of Jesus Christ to an olive tree, some of whose natural branches have been broken off and replaced by unnatural branches that

14. See Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*, 87: “Life from the dead’ must refer to the resurrection specifically so named, and so understood it presupposes the beginning of the closing act of the eschatological drama.”

15. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2.83-4.

were grafted into the one olive tree. This imagery draws upon Old Testament usage where the children of Israel are described as an olive tree (cf. Jer. 11:16, 17; Hos. 14:6). The purpose of Paul's use of the analogy of the olive tree is to counter any boasting on the part of Gentiles, who are represented by the unnatural branches that are grafted into the olive tree. Though it is true that many of the natural branches, which represent the children of Israel who had enjoyed the benefits of covenant privileges, have been broken off the olive tree on account of their unbelief, this should not lead those unnatural branches, the Gentiles who have been grafted in, to become arrogant and boastful.

The reason the apostle Paul warns the Gentiles not to become boastful or arrogant is that they have received salvation only through the kindness and grace of God toward them. Furthermore, the Gentiles belong now to the same olive tree, the same people of God who were represented by the faithful among the children of Israel. They belong to a company that includes the faithful remnant of Israel, and their participation in the blessing of salvation through Christ is only in virtue of their being now numbered with the natural branches that remain. The privilege and blessing that have now come to the Gentiles is not granted them apart from their intimate communion with the people of Israel, but by means of their coming to share in the inheritance that first was Israel's. There is no room whatever, therefore, for a kind of arrogance toward the children of Israel, particularly those who have fallen away through unbelief. The apostle even appeals to the loss of the natural branches who have been cut off as a warning that the same severity may be exercised toward those Gentiles who should fall away in unbelief.

Moreover, he adds at the conclusion of this section the possibility that God's power may yet be revealed in the re-grafting of the natural branches into the olive tree. Consistent with the emphasis throughout these chapters, the apostle holds out the prospect of further blessing and salvation for the people of Israel. Again he uses the "how much more" argument of the preceding verses. If the grafting in of unnatural branches in the context of the breaking off of natural branches has served to manifest God's gracious power and blessing toward the Gentiles, surely the re-grafting of these natural branches will serve only to magnify even further the gracious purpose and faithfulness of God toward them as well.

Verses 25-36: The Salvation of "All Israel"

[25] Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. [26] And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written, "The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob"; [27] "and this will be my covenant with them, when I take away their sins." [28] As regards the gospel, they are enemies of God for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. [29] For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. [30] Just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, [31] so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. [32] For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. [33] Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! [34] "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" [35] "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be

repaid?" [36] For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

With these verses, we come to the climactic conclusion of the apostle Paul's treatment in Romans 11 of the question of God's saving purpose regarding his people, Israel. In this closing section of chapter 11, the apostle draws a conclusion that fully answers the question that runs like a thread through these chapters: has God's Word failed with respect to those who were the first in the history of redemption to enjoy his calling and favor?

The language with which this section begins—"Lest you be wise in your own conceits, I want you to understand this mystery" (Οὐ γὰρ θέλω ὑμᾶς ἄγνοεῖν, ἀδελφοί, τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο, ἵνα μὴ ᾗτε [παρ'] ἑαυτοῖς φρόνιμοι)—underscores that the apostle is now going to draw his argument to a conclusion. When similar language is used by Paul in the epistle to the Romans and other epistles (cf. Rom. 1:13; 1 Cor. 10:1; 12:1; 2 Cor. 1:8; 1 Thess. 4:13), the reader is put on notice that a point of special importance is about to be made. Furthermore, when the apostle adds the language of "this mystery" (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο), he emphasizes that he aims to disclose an important feature of God's will and purpose that has been previously unrevealed (cf. Eph. 3:9; Col. 1:26, 27). By using this language, the Gentiles to whom Paul is still speaking are alerted to the apostle's intention to explain now the significance of what he has previously outlined.

After signaling to his readers that he is about to reveal a profound mystery regarding God's redemptive purpose with respect to the Gentiles as well as Israel, Paul reiterates two truths that have been embedded in the preceding argument of chapter 11: first, the hardening of Israel was only "in part" (ἀπὸ μέρους), since God's purpose of election was evident in the salvation of a believing remnant from among the people as a whole; and second, this hardening does not represent the final word regarding the salvation of Israel, since it will only continue "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in" (ἄχρι οὗ τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν εἰσέλθῃ). As John Murray argues in his commentary on Romans, the reference to the "fullness of the Gentiles" (τὸ πλήρωμα τῶν ἐθνῶν) in verse 25 has a "complexion of meaning" appropriate to the context. In comparison to the "trespass" and "loss" that Israel has experienced through unbelief, the "fullness of the Gentiles" points to an enlarged blessing in which many of the Gentiles will enter into the kingdom of God. Though it has been suggested that this language simply refers to the sum total of the elect from among the Gentiles, the context includes the use of similar language with respect to Israel (11:12) where it can scarcely refer to the sum total of the elect remnant in Israel. Because Israel's "fullness" is contrasted with her trespass and loss through unbelief, it seems evident that this language implies a greater or enlarged measure of God's blessing than previously was the case. Therefore, the point of verse 25 is to call attention to the prospect of the removal of the hardening of Israel and her re-engrafting into the olive tree of God's redeemed people. The contextual clues throughout Romans 11, which point to the prospect of Israel's acceptance and life from the dead, seem to be drawn together at this point in order to prepare for the affirmation of verse 26.

But what then of the all-important affirmation in verse 26—"And in this way all Israel will be saved" (καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται)? Is Paul referring here to: (1) the sum of all the elect, whether Jew or Gentile, (2) the sum of the elect remnant within Israel, or (3) a future circumstance of enlarged blessing

and salvation for the people of Israel as a whole? In my judgment, the likeliest answer to this question is that Paul is referring to a forthcoming reversal in the history of God's realization of his redemptive purposes, which will be marked by the salvation of the fullness of the people of Israel. There are several considerations that support this interpretation.

First, as our comments on the preceding argument of chapter 11 indicate, there are important clues in the context that the apostle is not referring simply to the sum of the remnant among the people of Israel. The sum of a remnant is still a remnant, and this would not advance the argument beyond the point Paul initially makes in chapter 9 and again in chapter 10 and again at the beginning of chapter 11. The context speaks of a contrast between Israel's trespass and loss on the one hand, and the "fullness" of the Gentiles on the other. It also speaks of Israel's "life from the dead" and "acceptance," which stands in marked contrast with her circumstance at present, which is one of unbelief and diminished blessing. Since these contextual clues have already been noted, including the apostle's intimation that he is about to make known a distinct "mystery" heretofore unrevealed in the salvation of the remnant of Israel, we will not develop this consideration further.

Second, the meaning of "Israel" in verse 26 can hardly be the sum total of all elect persons whether Jew or Gentile. In the immediate and more distant setting that leads to the conclusion of this verse, the apostle Paul has consistently used (11 times) the term Israel in reference to the theocratic adoption of the people of Israel, the descendants of Abraham whom he describes as "kinsmen according to the flesh" (9:3). Furthermore, the parallel between verse 26 and the verse that precedes it would be senseless, were "Israel" in this verse to include Gentiles as well as Jews who will be saved within God's purposes of redemption. The distinction between Israel as a particular people and the Gentiles governs the argument throughout the chapter and indeed throughout Romans 9-11 as a whole.

Third, since the main point of verse 25 is that Israel's hardening is not final, but will hold true "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in," the conclusion of verse 26 would naturally suggest that Paul is now referring to a reversal of the pattern of Israel's unbelief and hardening that has been the occasion for the enlargement of blessing among the Gentiles. Within the context of the sustained argument of chapter 11, it would be an extraordinary anti-climax for Paul to conclude that Israel's restoration, acceptance, and life from the dead will amount to nothing other than the salvation of a small remnant. In his commentary on Romans, John Murray well summarizes this consideration:

If we keep in mind the theme of this chapter and the sustained emphasis on the restoration of Israel, there is no other alternative than to conclude that the proposition, "all Israel shall be saved," is to be interpreted in terms of the fullness, the receiving, the engrafting of Israel as a people, the restoration of Israel to gospel favour and blessing and the correlative turning of Israel from unbelief to faith and repentance. When the preceding verse are related to verse 26, the salvation of Israel must be conceived of on a scale that is commensurate with their trespass, their loss, their casting away, their breaking off, and their hardening, commensurate, of course, in the opposite direction. This is plainly the implication of the contrasts intimated in fullness, receiving,

grafting in, and salvation. In a word, it is the salvation of the mass of Israel that the apostle affirms.¹⁶

And fourth, this interpretation also fits well with the apostle's appeal in verses 26-27, which adduce prophecies from Isaiah 59:20, 21 and Jeremiah 31:34 to prove that this kind of salvation of all Israel, her restoration to blessing and salvation, was promised in the Old Testament. The fulfillment of these Old Testament promises of Israel's future restoration confirm, as the apostle then reminds his readers, that God's "election" of Israel and the "gifts and calling of God" that were hers, are "irrevocable." With this language, the apostle takes his readers back to the question initially posed in chapter 9, to which the language of verse 26 provides a culminating answer. Israel will by no means fall away irrevocably through unbelief, since God will ultimately save "all Israel." Just as the unbelief of Israel was the occasion for the salvation of the Gentiles, so the salvation of the Gentiles will now be the occasion for the salvation of all Israel. In this manner, God's mercy will be shown to "all" (v. 32).

The cumulative weight of these considerations warrant the conclusion that Paul is describing a future restoration of Israel in which an abundance of blessing and salvation will be granted to her. However, before we conclude our argument regarding the interpretation of "all Israel" in this passage, we need to consider three arguments that are often raised against this interpretation.

The first of these arguments calls attention to the expression, "and in this way" (καὶ οὕτως) with which the apostle begins verse 26. It is often noted that this expression does not have a temporal meaning ("and then") but expresses the idea of manner. A literal translation of this expression would render it by such phrases as "and accordingly" or "and in this manner." Those who object to the idea that Paul is referring to a future conversion of the preponderance of the people of Israel, claim that this interpretation inserts a temporal sense into the text that is simply not there.¹⁷ Rather than referring to a future enlargement of blessing for Israel, the apostle Paul is only summarizing what he had previously outlined as God's redemptive purpose in the salvation of the remnant of Israel. In the way or manner of God's electing purpose, which has been and is being fulfilled in the salvation of this remnant, God is in fact securing the salvation of all Israel.

Though this argument is partially correct in its handling of the expression "and in this way" at the beginning of verse 26, it does not constitute a significant argument against the interpretation we have advanced. This expression clearly means to link Paul's conclusion in verse 26 with what he has previously stated in verse 25. As we have argued, the context to which this expression refers is one that intimates the present, but not final, outcome of God's purpose of redemption with respect to Israel. It is a context that includes a temporal indicator in verse 25 ("until the fullness of the Gentiles"). That purpose is not fulfilled in the present circumstance of a "partial hardening," but will be fulfilled in the circumstance of Israel's re-engrafting into the olive tree of God's people. The context of verse 26 simply shows that temporal

16. *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2.98.

17. See, e.g., N.T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans*, 691.

sequencing is embedded in the way Paul has described the manner in which God will fulfill his purpose for Israel.¹⁸

The second argument appeals to the language of “all” in the phrase “all” Israel. Anthony Hoekema, for example, adduces this qualifier to conclude that Paul must be speaking of the sum of all the elect within Israel whom God will save throughout the course of redemptive history.¹⁹ After all, if Paul is referring to a future conversion of a large company within Israel, even this company would not, strictly speaking, be inclusive of all elect Jews. “All” would not truly mean “all” then. Moreover, the strict sense of this term might imply the future conversion not only of the preponderance of the people of Israel but of all members of ethnic Israel without exception. This argument by Hoekema is not difficult to answer, however, since the Scriptural usage of “all” can and often does refer to “the mass, the people as a whole in accord with the pattern followed in the chapter throughout.”²⁰ No more than the “fullness” or “richness” of the Gentiles need refer to the salvation of all Gentiles in a distributive sense, does “all” Israel require the presumption that every person within Israel will be saved without exception.²¹

Perhaps the most difficult argument to answer is a third argument that appeals to Paul’s use of the language of “now” (νῦν) in verse 31. There the apostle seems to speak in a way that implies the present (at the time of the writing of the epistle to the Romans) gathering and fulfillment of the salvation of all Israel.²² The insertion of this temporal indicator means that the apostle Paul was not envisioning a yet-unfulfilled eschatological future for Israel, but was describing a reality that was already being fulfilled in the context of the present proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to Jew and Gentile alike.

There are several observations that will help to clarify Paul’s use of this language. In the first place, when Paul speaks of what “now” is the case, he is speaking in the broad context of a shift that has taken place in the history of redemption. It is significant that his “now” contrasts in the context with his reference to “at one time” (ποτε, 11:30). Whereas prior to the coming of Christ, the Gentiles were largely excluded from the reach of God’s saving grace, this is no longer true in the present, in the “now” of the epoch in redemptive history that begins with Christ’s first advent and concludes with his coming at the end of the age. The term does not exclude any part of the present or future, so far as it belongs to this culminating epoch in redemptive history. Thus, the apostle’s use of “now” ought not to be taken as setting up a contrast with the “future”; the contrast he envisions is with the past, pre-advent-

18. See Kenneth L. Gentry, Jr., “A Postmillennialist Response to Robert B. Strimple,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 135-6; and Geerhardus Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 89 fn16. Vos correctly suggests that the debate about the translation of this phrase as “and then” misses the point, since the manner in which Israel’s salvation will be achieved includes within itself the idea of temporal progression.

19. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future*, 144.

20. John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 2.98. Examples of this usage of “all” are frequent in the Old Testament. See, e.g., 1 Kings 12:1; 2 Chron. 12:1; Dan. 9:11.

21. Geerhardus Vos, *Pauline Eschatology*, 89: “Just as the ‘riches of the world,’ and the ‘riches of the Gentiles’ take the pagan world in its organic, collective sense, so the other term in the antithesis requires the same understanding. It need scarcely be added, that ‘collective’ is not identical with a ‘universalistically’-conceived extension of the two effect to all single men on either side.”

22. See, e.g., Robert B. Strimple, “Amillennialism,” in *Three Views on the Millennium and Beyond*, 116; Robertson, *The Israel of God*, 170-1; N.T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans*, 694. Some manuscripts do not include νῦν in verse 31, but the best manuscript evidence supports its inclusion.

of-Christ, epoch in redemptive history. The future that Paul envisions in this passage belongs to the period denominated by the language of “now.”²³

It should also be observed that, as we have argued in the preceding, there is a temporal sequencing that belongs to the context for Paul’s conclusion in verse 26. In this verse Paul says that “and in this way all Israel *will* be saved.” In the verse immediately preceding it, he speaks of what will transpire “*until* the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (v. 25). When Paul speaks of what is “now” the case in verse 30, he includes both the present circumstance of the salvation of many of the Gentiles and the anticipated circumstance of the restoration of all Israel. This language does not permit the determination of a kind of timetable for the unfolding of God’s purposes with respect to Gentiles and Israel in the present age. It only tells us that the entirety of God’s purposes will be concluded during the present epoch of the gathering of the church, comprised of Jews and Gentiles alike, until God’s mercy to all has been manifested. These purposes accord with the Old Testament promise of the future salvation of Israel and the Gentiles.

Conclusion

Though these considerations could be elaborated upon and various objections answered further, this should be enough to show that the most likely reading of this passage is one that takes it to teach the future ingathering and conversion of the people of Israel. This does not mean that every individual member of the people of Israel will ultimately be saved, or that all members of this people will be converted at some future time. The fullness of Israel need not mean the salvation of every member of this people any more than the fullness of the Gentiles means the salvation of every Gentile. However, it does suggest that the apostle Paul taught that the time will come in which a fullness of Israel will be converted, an engrafting again of Israel as a people, a restoration of this special people of God to enlarged gospel favor and blessing.

If this understanding of the future salvation of the fullness of Israel through the preaching of the gospel is correct, then three corollaries deserve to be mentioned in conclusion.

The first is that there is but one way of salvation for Jew and Gentile alike, and that is the way of faith in response to the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 10:1-17). The burden of the argument of the apostle Paul in Romans 9-11 is that all are saved only as they are grafted into the one olive tree, in fellowship through faith with the one and only Savior whose righteousness answers to the need of Jew and Gentile. Nowhere in the Word of God do we have a clearer repudiation of any teaching that suggests different pathways to salvation for Jews and Gentiles. Today this idea is often taught in the form of a “two-covenant theology,” the one covenant unique to the people of Israel, the other unique to the Gentile nations. Though Romans 9-11 suggests that God’s purposes of redemption include a purpose uniquely addressed and suited to the special people of Israel, it stands opposed to any such two-

23. Paul does use “now” in this broad, historical-redemptive sense in other places in his epistles (see, e.g., 2 Cor. 6:2; Eph. 2:3; 2 Tim. 1:10). Cf. similar references to “now,” “the last days,” and “the fullness of time” (Heb. 9:26; Acts 2:16-17, 24; 1 Cor. 10:11; 2 Tim. 3:1; Heb. 1:1-2; 9:26; 1 Pet. 1:20; 1 John 2:18; Mark 1:15; Gal. 4:4).

covenant position.²⁴ All who will be saved will be saved through faith in response to the same gospel and within the fellowship of the one people of God (Eph. 2:11-22).

The second corollary is that believers should continue to have a keen interest in the preaching of the gospel to the people of Israel. Rather than concluding that God's purposes have ended for them, we should preach and evangelize in expectation that, because the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable, his calling of Israel will not terminate in her wholesale unbelief but rather in her fullness being saved. This should stimulate and encourage the church in her calling to preach the gospel to the Gentiles as well as to the Jews. The assumption that God has wholly abandoned Israel to her unbelief is an assumption that is biblically unwarranted. The church of Jesus Christ must continue to preach the gospel "for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Gentile" (Rom. 1:16). And the church should do so in the confidence that God's Word has not and will not fail, because the "gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom. 11:29).²⁵

And third, contrary to the claim of some dispensationalists, an a- or post-millennial eschatology does not entail a form of what is called "supersessionism" or "replacement" theology.²⁶ Whereas "supersessionism" is said to view the church of Jesus Christ as a people that replaces Israel, the teaching of the apostle Paul in Romans 9-11 is that the people of God is constituted of the whole number of those whom God will save in accordance with his purpose of election. The whole people of God, whether Jews or Gentiles, are one "olive tree" with "natural" and "unnatural" branches. The burden of the apostle Paul's argument through Romans 9-11 is that the true Israel of God will be saved, since nothing can frustrate or prevent God's achievement of his sovereign and gracious purpose. When the Gentile nations are gathered in the fullness of time into the church of Jesus Christ, this will not occur to the exclusion of Israel. The restoration of Israel to gospel blessing will occur in the context of, and not in contradiction to, the inclusion of the Gentiles. Even though God is gathering one people, and the dividing wall of hostility between Jew and Gentile is broken down through the blood of Christ (cf. Eph. 2:11-22), we ought not to conclude that God's saving intention for Israel has been superseded. Rather, in the marvelous working out of God's electing purpose, the salvation of the fullness of the Gentiles will occur in tandem with the salvation, even the restoration, of Israel to gospel blessing and privilege.

24. A fine evaluation of the two-covenant view is provided by David E. Holwerda, in his *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* On the issue of the meaning of "all Israel" in Romans 11:26, Holwerda offers what might be called a "soft" version of the view that "all Israel" refers to a future "eschatological fullness" (his expression) of Israel (16-75). For an early, influential presentation of a two-covenant understanding, see Krister Stendahl, *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976).

25. For a more extensive treatment of the implications of this passage for Christian evangelism, see John R. W. Stott, *Romans: God's Good News for the World* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1994), 313-15.

26. For a brief but instructive discussion of this language, see Samuel E. Waldron, *MacArthur's Millennial Manifesto* (Owensboro, KY: RBAP, 2008), 5-8.