

Rethinking Israel: An Exposition of Romans 11:25-27.

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²⁵ I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. ²⁶ And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:

*“The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.*

*²⁷ And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”¹*

What precisely did the apostle Paul have in mind when he said, “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26a)? In his commentary on Romans, Douglas Moo has hailed these words as “the storm center in the interpretation of Rom. 9-11 and of NT teaching about the Jews and their future.”² Why so? Not only do these words have a poignant existential relevance, given the ongoing volatile situation in the Middle East, but Romans 11 is also the only passage in Scripture that explicitly discusses the future role of Israel in God’s redemptive purposes.³ Added to its unique place within biblical revelation is the challenge of this chapter’s immediate context, which bristles with exegetical difficulties. Not without some hyperbole, N. T. Wright has highlighted this challenge in picturesque language: “Romans 9-11 is as full of problems as a hedgehog is of prickles. Many have given it up as a bad job, leaving Romans as a book with eight chapters of ‘gospel’ at the beginning, four of ‘application’ at the end, and three of puzzle in the middle.”⁴

¹ Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

² Douglas Moo, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 719.

³ Thus Kim Riddlebarger, *A Case for Amillennialism: Understanding the End Times* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 180.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 231.

1. *The Basic Problem*

The centrepiece of the puzzle to which Wright refers is the term all Israel. If this piece of the exegetical puzzle can be correctly interpreted, it has the potential of opening up not only the intended meaning of vv. 25-27 but that of Romans 9-11 as a whole. Not surprisingly, the meaning of the expression has been greatly disputed down the centuries. In the history of interpretation (and for that matter within the context of Reformed theology) three major schools of thought can be identified. "All Israel" has been defined as (a) all the elect, both Jews and Gentiles, or (b) all the elect of ethnic Israel throughout history, or (c) the ethnic nation of Israel as a whole at some future time in history.⁵ These views can all claim a time-honoured and scholarly pedigree. To do them justice it will perhaps be best to allow some of their major exponents to speak for themselves. Each of these views has contributed significantly to the current exegetical debate.

1.1 All Israel as the Elect, Jews and Gentiles

This position is most frequently associated with the name of John Calvin. He followed Augustine in identifying "all Israel" with "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16), those redeemed Jews and Gentiles who make up the body of Christ. In his Romans commentary Calvin explains his view as follows:

Many understand this of the Jewish people, as though Paul had said, that religion would be restored among them as before: but I extend the word *Israel* to all the people of God, according to this meaning, - "When all the Gentiles shall come in, the Jews also shall return from their defection to the

⁵ Cf. Ben L. Merkle, "Romans 11 and the Future of Ethnic Israel," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000): 709. C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979), 2: 576, identifies a fourth school: "the whole nation Israel, including every individual member." As representatives he cites Aquinas, Kuehl and K. L. Schmidt. For our purposes this view can be regarded as a sub-set of (c).

obedience of faith; and thus shall be completed the salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be gathered from both; and yet in such a way that the Jews shall obtain the first place, being as it were the first-born in God's family." This interpretation seems to me the most suitable, because Paul intended here to set forth the completion of the kingdom of Christ, which is by no means to be confined to the Jews, but is to include the whole world. The same manner of speaking we find in Gal. vi. 16. The Israel of God is what he calls the Church, gathered alike from Jews and Gentiles.⁶

More recently scholars such as Karl Barth, Joachim Jeremias and N. T. Wright have held this interpretation.⁷ It also continues to draw a following in Reformed circles. An example is O. Palmer Robertson who agrees with Calvin but reaches his conclusion via a slightly different route. Having identified the Gentiles' "coming in" (v. 25) with their being grafted into the olive tree that is Israel (vv. 17-24), Robertson then argues:

The full inclusion of the Gentiles into Israel is the other side of the mystery about which Paul speaks (Rom. 11:25; cf. Eph. 3:6). On the one hand, the mystery is that God in the sovereign dispensing of his grace has hardened some in Israel and has saved others. On the other hand the mystery is that God has incorporated Gentile believers fully into Israel.

It is in this context that "all Israel" in Romans 11:26 reaches its final definition. According to Paul, "Hardness of heart has happened to part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come in [to Israel], and in this manner all Israel shall be saved." The full number that are the product of God's electing grace, coming from both the Jewish and Gentile communities, will constitute the final Israel of God. "All Israel", then, consists of the entire body of God's elect from among both Jews and Gentiles.⁸

⁶ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (translated and edited by John Owen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 437.

⁷ Merkle, "Romans 11," 709.

⁸ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000), 188.

It is not difficult to see why this view still has an appeal. Its strength lies in the fact that it seems to fit Paul's argument at this point. Not only the image of the olive tree, but also Paul's argument in 9:22-29 and 10:11-13 suggests that "all Israel" is made up of both Jews and Gentiles.

1.2 All Israel as the Elect Jews throughout History

This view can also claim impressive scholarly support. It has been the option preferred by Herman Bavinck, Albrecht Bengel, Louis Berkhof, William Hendriksen, Anthony Hoekema, Herman Hoeksema, Richard Lenski and Herman Ridderbos.⁹ At a more popular level Hendriksen has emphatically defended this position as being "the right view":

In each generation God gathers out from among the Jews *a remnant* that will be saved, certain "branches" that are grafted back into their own olive tree. Note, however: never more than *certain branches*, never more than a *remnant!* Now, *all these remnants put together constitute ALL ISRAEL.* Alongside of the process whereby *the fulness* (that is, the full number of elect) *of the Gentiles* is brought in, occurs also the process whereby ALL ISRAEL (all the elect from among *the Jews*) is saved. SO – that is, *remnant-wise*, as far as God's saving activity is concerned; *faith-wise*, as far as man is concerned (see verse 23) – ALL ISRAEL will be saved. SO,

⁹ See Cranfield, *Romans* 2: 576; Merkle, "Romans 11," 711. This is also the position defended by Merkle in the remainder of his article. In his conclusion he writes: "Romans 11 does not teach a future mass conversion of ethnic Israel but that there will always be a remnant of believing Jews until the end of time. Does this interpretation minimize the work of God among the Jewish people? On the contrary, it demonstrates the faithfulness of God to his promises and to his people. Furthermore, this interpretation fuels evangelistic efforts, since we have the promise that God will always have a remnant of Jewish people who will be saved by grace through faith in the Messiah" (721). This is also the view adopted (though not specifically defended) by J. W. Deenick, *Not on This Mountain: An Alternative Christian Perspective on Zionism* (Enumclaw, Washington: Pleasant Word, 2003), 172-175.

and in no other way; hence, *not* as a nation, but as a collection of remnants throughout the ages; *not* by continuing in unbelief, but accepting Christ through living faith.¹⁰

Less dogmatically, but with equal conviction, Hoekema directs his argument toward the same conclusion. He summarises Paul's teaching in Romans 11 in the following way:

Though Israel has been hardened in its unbelief, this hardening has always been and will continue to be only a partial hardening, never a total hardening. In other words, Israel will continue to turn to the Lord till the Parousia, while at the same time the fulness of the Gentiles is being gathered in. And in this way all Israel will be saved: not just the last generation of Israelites, but all true Israelites – all those who are not just *of Israel* but are *Israel*, to use the language of Romans 9:6. Another way of putting this would be: *all Israel* in Romans 11:26 means the totality of the elect among Israel. The salvation of all Israel, therefore, does not take place exclusively at the end-time, but takes place throughout the era between Christ's first and second coming – in fact, from the time of the call of Abraham. *All Israel*, therefore, differs from the elect remnant spoken of in 11:5, but only as the sum-total of all the remnants throughout history.¹¹

This view is attractive as Paul has emphasised the remnant throughout Romans 9-11. When the fullness of the Gentiles is brought in, then – as it were in tandem - all the Jews are also saved. Historically this view has enjoyed wide support from those in the Continental Reformed tradition, although its supporters are obviously not confined to this theological stream.

¹⁰ William Hendriksen, *The Bible on the Life Hereafter* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971), 147-148 [emphasis his]. In greater detail Hendriksen has argued the same point in his *New Testament Commentary: Romans* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1981), 2: 379-382.

¹¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 145.

1.3 All Israel as the Majority of Ethnic Jews in the Future

This position has been described as “the most popular theory”¹² and as “by far the majority view.”¹³ In essence it holds that there will be a large ingathering of Jews at the end or at least at some future point in history. This view would bring Paul’s argument in Romans 9-11 (and with it all of church history) to a grand climax and crescendo. It too has been championed by some notable expositors. Among them are C. K. Barrett, C. E. B. Cranfield, Ernst Kaesemann and Theodor Zahn. Also in Reformed circles it has not been without capable support. Princeton theologian Charles Hodge, for example, claims that this interpretation has been the one generally received in every age of the church with the exception of the Reformation. From the wider context of Romans 11 Hodge then gives some of the main reasons as to why he believes this to be the correct understanding:

The whole context and drift of the apostle’s discourse is in its favour. In the preceding part of the chapter, Paul, in the plainest terms, had taught that the conversion of the Jews was a probable event, and that it would be in the highest degree beneficial and glorious for the whole world. . . . It is evident that Paul meant to say, that the Jews were to be restored in the sense in which they were then rejected. They were then rejected not merely as individuals, but as a community, and therefore are to be restored as a community; see vers. 11, 15. How can the latter passage (ver. 15), especially, be understood of the conversion of the small number of Jews which, from age to age, have joined the Christian Church?¹⁴

Hodge elaborates on this view in his explanation of verse 26a: “Israel, here, from the context, must mean the Jewish people, and *all Israel*, the whole nation. The Jews, as a people, are now rejected; as a people they are to be restored. As their rejection, although

¹² Hendriksen, *Romans*, 2: 379.

¹³ Merkle, “Romans 11,” 710.

¹⁴ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 [reproduction of the Revised Edition first published in 1886]), 371-372.

national, did not include the rejection of every individual; so their restoration, although in like manner national, need not be assumed to include the salvation of every individual Jew.”¹⁵

In his Romans commentary John Murray has argued along similar lines:

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 fulness, the receiving, the ingrafting 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 verses are related to verse 26, the salvation of Israel must be conceived 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 fulness, receiving, grafting in, and salvation. In a word, it is the salvation of the mass of Israel that the apostle affirms. . . . We need to be reminded again of the historical perspective of this section. The apostle is thinking of a time in the future when the hardening of Israel will terminate.¹⁶

This view was also popular among the Puritans in England and the Covenanters in Scotland during the seventeenth century. For them the future of the Jews had decisive significance. They believed that the Scriptural evidence warranted the hope that with the calling of the

¹⁵ Hodge, *Romans*, 374; cf. the recent article by A. Ito, “ ‘All Israel Will Be Saved’!” [in Japanese] *Exegetica* [Tokyo] 13 (2002): 55-72. Ito’s view has been summarised in *New Testament Abstracts* 47 (2003): 270-271: “We cannot avoid the conclusion that the phrase πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ in Rom 11:26 refers to the ethnic people of Israel. Paul seems to understand that the predicted ingathering of the dispersed Israel from various peoples is fulfilled in the salvation of ‘all Israel.’ It appears that πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ refers to the ‘Israel within Israel,’ which is more comprehensive than the remnant who have already believed in Christ in Paul’s time but smaller than the historical Israel.”

¹⁶ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 2: 98.

Jews there would be extensive and far-reaching blessings for the whole world. For this reason, rather than because of a mere interest in unfulfilled prophecy, Israel had a prominent place in their thinking.¹⁷ Some of the major missions to Jewish people today would appear – either directly or indirectly – to be the heirs of this tradition. Although none of them officially subscribes to a particular interpretation of Romans 11, *Christian Witness to Israel*,¹⁸ *Jews for Jesus*¹⁹ and *Celebrate Messiah*²⁰ in practice all seem to adopt a version of this third view.

¹⁷ Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1971), 59-60.

¹⁸ *Christian Witness to Israel* does not have an official view on Romans 11 to which staff are expected to adhere. A *CWI* representative, however, in personal correspondence claimed that he knew of no colleagues “who do not take the view that those verses teach that there will be a future return of the Jews to Messiah Jesus in great numbers.” On a personal note he added: “I came to this understanding as I struggled with the emphasis in God’s Word on the worldwide impact of the Gospel. My longing for the salvation of the nations led me to see the importance of Jewish evangelism because their salvation will be the key to abundant blessing worldwide.” This is clearly a contemporary expression of the Puritan hope!

¹⁹ According to the research librarian for *Jews for Jesus* in San Francisco, the movement has no position on Romans 11. However, he did refer me to two “helpful treatments of the subject”: (a) Cranfield’s *Romans* where he argues that the most likely interpretation of *all Israel* is that it refers to “the nation Israel as a whole, but not necessarily including every individual member” (2: 576); (b) Steve Motyer’s *Israel in the Plan of God: Light on Today’s Debate* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1989) where *all Israel* is defined as “all elect Israelites,” i.e. “the entire company of those ‘from the Jews’ whom God wills to call ‘my people’ in fulfilment of his purposes of election” (156-157). These two positions are clearly not identical. In Motyer’s view, however, Israel’s present partial hardening is not permanent and the time will come when “the remnant/rest distinction will be broken down” (150-151). Both Cranfield and Motyer would therefore seem to anticipate future blessing for “all Israel”, and it is this anticipation that helps to inspire a movement like *Jews for Jesus*.

²⁰ Contact with *Celebrate Messiah* at their Melbourne office yielded what had by now become a familiar result. Like the other two missions it has no official statement on the future of Israel. The representative I spoke to informed me, however, that *Celebrate Messiah* is “fully aligned with Israel in every way.” He recommended Harold A. Sevener’s book, *Israel’s Glorious Future: The Prophecies and Promises of God Revealed* (Charlotte, North Carolina: Chosen People Ministries, 1996). Sevener’s eschatology is clearly dispensational and pre-tribulationist. On his view Israel’s future is closely tied up with the present nation-state: “It would appear that the capture of Jerusalem in 1967, and its subsequent

Vox Reformata, 68

Although there are wide variations within this school of thought, it remains a very attractive view. It gives great incentive to Jewish evangelism and challenges Christians to pray for large-scale revival amongst Jewish people. The return of the Jews to Israel could then possibly be seen as the stage setting for a mighty work of God among his ancient people.

1.4 Evaluation

Each of the major views on *all Israel* that have emerged in the history of the Christian church clearly has its appeal. As we have seen, each can claim a healthy scholarly pedigree and strong historical precedent. These credentials for what are essentially mutually exclusive viewpoints suggest that we proceed with due caution. Here equally competent and godly scholars disagree. The opposing views can be substantiated by cogent arguments. Proponents who were quoted above in some detail²¹ in support of the different positions adhere to the same theological system (in this case confessional Calvinism). All these factors underscore the difficulty of the problem. It would therefore clearly be unwise to rush to hasty conclusions.

2. The Wider Context

Because we have encountered such a knotty exegetical difficulty, we will do well to consider Paul's reference to "all Israel" in its broadest possible context. Where was Paul when he penned these elusive

rebuilding, is a necessary step in the fulfillment of end-time prophecy. If this is so, it would also appear that God is setting the stage of world history to fulfill the times of the Gentiles" (36). This Gentile era will be followed by a period of intense suffering known as the Great Tribulation. During this time Sevensen "sees Israel, not the Church, as God's agency for world evangelism" (37). Following this, the Kingdom of God (the glorious Messianic kingdom of 1,000 years) is to be established on earth (63). In their detail Sevensen's prophetic interpretations become highly speculative and fanciful. It can only be hoped that *Celebrate Messiah* distances itself from some of the more extreme features of his book.

²¹ Namely Calvin, Robertson, Hendriksen, Hoekema, Hodge and Murray.

words? Where was he geographically? Where was he in his missionary career? Where was he in his argument? Similar questions could also be asked of his readers. Where were the Roman Christians – in terms of their faith, their doctrinal and spiritual understanding, and not least in terms of their relationship with one another? Before we can satisfactorily explain Romans 11:25-27 these questions deserve careful consideration.

2.1 Historical Background

A knowledge of the probable historical background will not solve this particular exegetical problem, but it will bring the relevant issues into sharper focus. It will also provide a broader framework in which the matter can be discussed.

(a) Paul's Situation

When we correlate the data in Romans with those found in the Book of Acts it is clear that Paul was now on the eve of his departure for Jerusalem. The collection for the poor was complete and Paul was committed to delivering it personally, together with representatives from the contributing churches (cf. Rom 15:25-29). This offering for the Jerusalem poor symbolised “the completion of his reconciling work between Jew and Gentile.”²² From Acts 20:2, 3 we learn that during his third missionary journey Paul came to Greece and spent three months there. It is highly likely that the precise location was Corinth (Rom 16:23) and that this provided an ideal opportunity for Paul to write the Epistle.

Hence a decisive juncture has been reached. Paul has completed some twenty years of missionary service and his three missionary journeys in the Eastern Mediterranean lie behind him. He can confidently say that “from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ” (Rom.15:19). It is now time to turn his eyes westward - to Rome and, beyond that, to Spain.

²² Luke T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation* (London: SCM, 1986), 314.

With his work in the East complete and with a mission field in Spain before his mind's eye, Paul may well have been intending to transfer his base from Antioch to Rome. While waiting at the home of his host Gaius (Rom 16:23), who most probably resided at Corinth (1 Cor 1:14), Paul was at leisure to undertake a very significant project. As Morris points out: "He used the time to write to the Roman Christians to let them know of his plan to visit them and to set down in order something of what *the gospel* meant. If Rome was to be his base, the Romans would need to be assured of his message and theological position. Thus such a weighty epistle is very much in place."²³

(b) The Readers' Situation

If, as is commonly agreed, Paul wrote his Epistle to the Romans from Corinth in approximately 57AD,²⁴ some significant events had recently transpired in the city of Rome. These events would most likely have had a strong impact on the Christian communities in the imperial city. In his *Life of Claudius* (25:4) the Roman historian Suetonius informs his readers: "Iudaeos impulsore Chresto assidue tumultuantis Roma expulit." ("Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of Chrestus [probably another form of Christ], he expelled them from Rome.")²⁵

As Suetonius was writing some seventy years after the event, it is apparent that he made more than just a spelling mistake. His account gives the impression that Christus was actually in Rome during the principate of Claudius (41-54AD), stirring up disorders within the Jewish community. It is far more likely that disturbances had occurred because of the recent arrival of disciples of Jesus.

²³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 17.

²⁴ Thus D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992), 241-242; Robert Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament* (fourth edition; Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2003), 394; Everett F. Harrison, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 304.

²⁵ *Suetonius* (translated by J. C. Rolfe; 2 vols.; Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 2: 52-53.

If this interpretation of Suetonius' statement is correct, his remark probably refers to violent debates within the Jewish community over the claims of Jesus to be the Christ. The expulsion order has traditionally been placed in the year 49AD and has found biblical attestation in Acts 18:2. There Luke says that Aquila and Priscilla had recently come from Italy to Corinth "because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome."

Although we know nothing of Christianity in Rome before this time (apart from what we may surmise from Acts 2:10), the expulsion of the Jewish Christians from the church in Rome must have had a significant impact. With the Jewish believers expelled, the Christian community became exclusively Gentile – at least for a time.

Claudius died in 54 and Nero became emperor.²⁶ No doubt the expulsion order lost its force, if it had not already done so, and Jews began to return to Rome. Evidence for this is found in Rom 16:3-5, where Paul greets Priscilla and Aquila and their house church. This suggests that they are once again in Rome. There are not the only Jewish names in the long list in chapter 16. Sanday and Headlam worked out the names in this chapter as roughly: Jew 8, Roman 4, Greek 10.²⁷ As a direct result of the expulsion, the composition of the Roman church probably changed radically. While prior to 49 it was most probably largely Jewish, by the time Paul wrote [in approx. 57], the Gentiles would likely have been in the majority. This reversal was bound to have its effect on church life. As Carson, Moo and Morris suggest:

"During its enforcement . . . the edict must have had a profound impact on the church at Rome. In the absence of Jewish Christians, those Gentiles who had been attracted to Christianity would have

²⁶ In the first five years of Nero's reign Jews and Christians had little to fear. During this so-called "golden quinquennium" the young emperor was under the benign tutelage of Seneca and Burrus. Seneca's brother was the unflappable Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, before whom Paul appeared at the tribunal in Corinth (Acts 18:12-17).

²⁷ William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (fifth edition; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 418-428.

taken over the church, and Jewish Christians who then returned would probably be a minority, and perhaps viewed with some condescension by the now-dominant Gentile wing.²⁸

This shift in membership also brought with it some pastoral implications. In chapter 14 the weaker brother who is a vegetarian and sabbatarian is evidently a Jewish Christian.

The dominance of the Gentile group also affects the way Paul addresses the Roman Christians. Early in the Epistle he addresses the church as though it were exclusively Gentile (1:5-6, 13-14). Later he reminds them that his apostleship was for the purpose of ministering to the Gentiles (cf. 15:15-19). The way the Epistle reads, it gives the distinct impression that the Gentiles are now clearly in the majority. Because of their newfound ascendancy they appear to have considered themselves to be strong, while at the same time regarding their Jewish brethren as weak (14:1-15:13).

It is perhaps also for this reason that Paul feels compelled to warn the Gentile believers against being boastful (11:18), arrogant (11:20) and conceited (11:25). Just because they are now in the majority in the Christian community in Rome, this is no reason for them to feel spiritually superior to the Jews. Nor do Paul's warnings in chapter 11 confine themselves to the Gentile believers' attitudes to Jewish Christians. Also those Jews who do not believe in Christ are not to be lightly esteemed. They too "are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (vv. 28-29). Moreover, since they are the natural branches, God is able to graft them back into their own olive tree (vv. 23-24). For Paul, anti-Semitism has no place in the church!²⁹

²⁸ Carson, Moo and Morris, *Introduction*, 243.

²⁹ In discussing the place of Romans 9-11 both within the Epistle itself and within Pauline theology, N. T. Wright makes a significant observation: "If the section is ignored or downplayed, there is an open and often-travelled road towards anti-semitism. A case can be made out, in fact, for saying that the standard Protestant exegesis of Romans, in which 9-11 was marginalized, robbed the church of the best weapon it could have had for identifying and combating some of the worst evils of the Third Reich" (*Climax of the Covenant*, 232-233).

2.2 Literary Context

In the exordium (1:1-7) Paul introduces himself to his readers in terms of his gospel. This was no doubt the same gospel that he had been preaching throughout his missionary journeys. The heart of this gospel was the message of justification by faith, a doctrine for which Paul argues strenuously in chapters 1-5. All human beings, whether Jews or Gentiles, lack the righteousness that God requires (1:18-3:20). Therefore their only hope lies in God providing that righteousness through Christ by means of the propitiation in his blood (3:21-5:21). Hence the only way that people can be right with God is through faith in Christ. But before Paul applies that doctrine to life in 12:1ff., he addresses two major objections that might be raised against it. He devotes no less than three chapters to answering each objection:

Objection 1:

If salvation is by faith, rather than by works, doesn't that lead to a careless (and perhaps even lawless) way of life? This objection is stated quite explicitly at the beginning of chapter six: "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" (6:1). Paul gives the short answer in the very next verse: "By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?" This short answer is then unpacked in the remainder of chapters six to eight:

- (a) We died to sin by being raised with Christ to newness of life (chapter 6).
- (b) We also died to the law which merely succeeds in identifying and diagnosing our sin, not in overcoming it (chapter 7).
- (c) We live in the newness of resurrection life by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit (chapter 8).

In chapters 6-8, therefore, Paul demonstrates the transforming power of God's righteousness. Justification leads to sanctification.

Objection 2:

The second major objection to Paul's teaching is met in chapters nine to eleven: If the message of justification by faith is true, and if it demonstrates God's justice, then why was it rejected by those for whom it was originally intended?³⁰ If, by and large, the gospel was rejected by Israel, how can it demonstrate the justice of God? If Israel fails to believe, how can the gospel be "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile" (1:16)?³¹ Have not Paul's own missionary journeys disproved the principle of Jewish priority? And – most seriously – haven't God's purposes failed, if Israel remains in unbelief?

Objection 1 seems to have been raised by Paul's opponents (3:7, 8). This second objection also deeply affected the apostle himself. For him Jewish unbelief was a very personal and heart-rending issue (9:1-5). "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart," he writes. As Paul pens these words, his emotions are deeply stirred. At the same time he addresses the turmoil of his own soul by way of a clear and cogent argument. At the outset he states the proposition that he is about to defend: "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (9:6). In the chapters that follow he both explains and develops this claim, and

³⁰ Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism*, 184, sees this as the critical question: "If the gospel went first to the Jews and only then to the Gentiles, why did Israel not embrace the Messiah? Why is Israel now under God's judgment instead of his blessing? Has God not kept his promises? Has he changed his purposes?"

³¹ Cf. Mark Harding, "The Salvation of Israel and the Logic of Romans 11:11-36," *Australian Biblical Review* 46 (1998): 57: "Paul's argument in 1:18-8:39 has cast a shadow over his claim that the gospel is for Jew first since it is clear that the Jews have largely insisted on keeping the Torah when confronted by gospel preaching. They need to be persuaded that Paul's message is to be believed, and that it comprises God's diagnosis and prescription for the Jew first. It is therefore totally expected that Paul, having declared at the outset that this is the case, should open the issue to a large-scale discussion as to why Israel has not been persuaded and what her destiny might be."

supports it from Scripture. Romans 9-11 is more densely populated with OT quotations than any comparable section of the NT.³²

As was the case with the first objection, he addresses this second major issue in a threefold way. Again he devotes a chapter to each major point of his argument. John Stott summarises this section of the Epistle very crisply:

- (a) Israel's fall: God's purpose of election (chapter 9).
- (b) Israel's fault: God's dismay over her disobedience (chapter 10).
- (c) Israel's future: God's long-term design (chapter 11).³³

As these chapters provide the immediate context to the passage under consideration, Paul's argument here needs to be traced in some detail.

(a) Chapter 9:

Here God shows himself to be a God of surprises. Hence Paul's argument, especially when it comes to his use of OT quotations, is grounded on the principle of reversal. Isaac the younger son is chosen over Ishmael the older son (vv. 7-9). Jacob the younger twin is chosen over Esau the older twin (vv. 10-13). The principle is then broadened when Paul observes that the lost tribes of Israel will be called "my people" and "beloved" (vv. 25-26), while only a remnant of Judah will survive (vv. 27-29). Those reversals are then compared to Paul's day, when only a minority of Jews responded positively to the gospel (i.e. a remnant), while Gentiles received it in large numbers (vv. 30-33). The OT pattern is repeating itself.³⁴ Another a reversal is taking place.

³² According to UBS⁴ there are 25 quotations in these chapters. This figure includes composite and merged quotations, but excludes mere allusions and echoes. Paul cites from an impressive range of OT literature. His quotes span eleven books as follows: Isaiah (13), Genesis (4), Deuteronomy (3), Psalms (3), Exodus (2), I Kings (2), Hosea (2), Leviticus, Job, Joel and Malachi (one each).

³³ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World* (The Bible Speaks Today; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 262. Stott also has a special heading for the doxology (11:33-36): "God's wisdom and generosity."

This is a point to which we must return.

³⁴ Cf. N. T. Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 239: "Paul is deliberately drawing on Old Testament imagery in order to make the point that what has happened in his own day is not outside the purposes of God as foretold in Jewish scripture, but is *Vox Reformata*, 68

Thus Paul is making some surprising alignments in Romans 9:

- (i) Isaac (vv. 6-9) → Jacob (vv. 10-13) → my beloved people (vv. 25-26) → believing Gentiles and a remnant of Jews (vv. 23-26).
- (ii) Ishmael (vv. 6-9) → Esau (vv. 10-13) → most people in Judah in Isaiah's day (vv. 27-29) → the majority of Jews in Paul's day (vv. 30-33).

Yet even though God is doing something surprising and unexpected, he is following the familiar OT pattern of reversal. This pattern can be traced as far back as the book of Genesis. When in v. 12 Paul quotes Gen 25:23 (LXX), "The older will serve the younger," he is not only picking up a thread that runs throughout the book, but he also skillfully weaves it into his own argument. As Frank Thielman explains:

For the ancient reader familiar both with Genesis and with social custom, this statement would link Paul's argument to one of the most shocking and entertaining features of Genesis. In the words of Robert Alter, Genesis 'is about the reversal of the iron law of primogeniture, about the election through some devious twist of destiny of a younger son to carry on the line.' Hence, not only does God choose Isaac over Ishmael and Jacob over Esau, but for no clear reason he prefers the sacrifice of Abel, the younger of Adam's two sons, to that of Cain, the elder (4:5). Again, for no clear reason, he preserves Abraham's seed through Joseph (45:4-7; cf. 49:4), for many years the youngest of Jacob's children and born to the younger of the two daughters of Laban, rather than through Reuben, the legitimate heir. Similarly, Zerah is mistakenly thought to be the older of Tamar's twins through the blunder of the attending midwife (38:27-30), and Jacob, at the end of his life, blesses Ephraim the second born rather than the first born, Manasseh, despite the protests of their father Joseph (48:17-22). . . . The motif is important for his

precisely what was prophesied. God has not been unfaithful to his promises, but has – precisely in the present apparent disaster – fulfilled them completely.”

[Paul's] argument. It shows that God's choice to include Gentiles is not as inconsistent with scripture as it at first seems – that God has in the past conferred his blessing on the least likely candidate, on the weak rather than the strong. The God of Israel's tradition, therefore, is paradoxically an untraditional God.³⁵

The same principle is at work when Paul draws from Hosea 1-2 in vv. 25-26. The appellations “not my people” and “not loved” in Hosea refer to the ten northern tribes of Israel who face exile and judgement. The promised restoration appears to be fulfilled in the mission to the Gentiles (vv. 23-24). As both Jews and Gentiles come into the church, “not my people” becomes “my people” and “not beloved” becomes “my loved one” (Hos 1:10; 2:23; Rom 9:25-26). It would seem that in this way the covenant with the “lost” tribes is restored (cf. 1 Pet 2:9-10). Again, the context of the quotes from Hosea would seem to fit Paul's argument perfectly. What in Hosea 1-2 seems like the promised restoration of the ten lost tribes appears from Romans 9 and 1 Peter 2 to be far grander in scope. It is fulfilled in the mission to the Gentiles. What at first sounds like a national promise, in its fulfillment turns out to be a global one. It extends far beyond the borders of Israel. Now the Gentiles are being brought in.

(b) Chapter 10

Paul begins with the same note of personal concern on which chapter 9 had opened: “Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved” (v. 1). But then the focus shifts from Israel's fall to Israel's fault. In theological terms, the emphasis now moves from divine sovereignty to human responsibility. Although “God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden” (9:18), human beings are still held accountable. For Paul the pointed and painful application of this truth is that Israel is responsible for its present state of unbelief. They did not submit to God's righteousness because they sought to establish their own (10:3). Yet God had made the righteousness that

³⁵ Frank Thielman, “Unexpected Mercy: Echoes of a Biblical Motif in Romans 9-11,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 47 (1994): 177-178.

is by faith very clear in the OT (vv. 6-8). Paul quotes Scripture again and again to demonstrate that the appeal of the gospel comes through loud and clear in the OT (v. 11 = Isa 28:16; v. 13 = Joel 2:32; v. 15 = Isa 52:7). But even though they heard it so clearly, and even though God pleaded with them, Israel did not heed the good news (vv. 16-21). For their unbelief they therefore have only themselves to blame (vv. 16, 21). Because of their disobedience the message has gone to the Gentiles – “those who are not a nation,” “a nation that has no understanding” (v. 19), “those who did not seek me” and “those who did not ask for me” (v. 20). Again, a dramatic reversal has taken place. Redemptive history has undergone an ironic twist in that “the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it” (9:30-31).

(c) Chapter 11

But the drama is not over yet. At the end of chapter 10 “Paul would seem to be arguing that God has disqualified his people from playing anything but a negative role in his saving purposes.”³⁶ Yet it would be wrong to conclude that God is finished with Israel. Paul’s major theme in chapter 11 is that Israel still has a future. A further reversal will take place. There is another surprise in store! Paul now considers God’s long-term design, and he does so from three perspectives: (i) the present remnant of Israel (vv. 1-10); (ii) the figure of the olive tree (vv. 11-24); and (iii) the future majority of Israel (vv. 25-32).³⁷

(i) The Present Remnant of Israel (vv. 1-10):

Although the majority of Jews at the present time are hardened (vv. 7-10), there is still an elect remnant, as there was in the days of Elijah (vv. 2-4). Evidence for this remnant is found in Paul himself (v. 1). This is proof positive that God has not rejected his people. At the same time this remnant is not the final word on the destiny of Israel.

³⁶ Harding, “Salvation of Israel,” 58.

³⁷ These sections follow the headings and divisions of the NIV.

In the remainder of the chapter Paul's discussion broadens out considerably. As Mark Harding explains:

Paul cannot let the matter rest with God calling a remnant to himself without addressing the divine promise to save a people for himself among the nations. The remnant is but a rump of the people. God had promised Abraham that he would become a mighty nation. If God's last word on this subject was the saving of a mere remnant that would seem to jeopardize the promise. Hence we discover that God has a final word on the destiny of Israel, even the Israel he had hardened. In both the imagery drawn from aborigines in 11:17-24 and the revelation of the "mystery" in 11:25-32, Paul will concentrate his readers' attention on the restoration of Israel.³⁸

(ii) The Figure of the Olive Tree (vv. 11-24):

The olive tree is an image of Israel (cf. Jer 11:16), into which Gentile Christians have been grafted as wild seedlings. But how is this image to be understood? It has been suggested that Paul contradicts actual practice. Generally branches of the wild olive tree are not grafted into domestic olive trees, but rather the other way around. Paul does not use this illustration out of ignorance, but he employs it deliberately, allowing his subject matter to graphically transform the metaphor.³⁹ If this is Paul's intention, then God's grafting slips from a crab-olive into a cultivated olive tree is indeed "an odd miracle of divine horticulture."⁴⁰

Others have argued that the details of the illustration should not be pressed. "The grafting of branches of a wild olive in among the natural branches," writes Donald Robinson, "has no purpose in the illustration other than to indicate that believing Gentiles partake

³⁸ Harding, "Salvation of Israel," 59-60.

³⁹ Thus I. Broer in his discussion of ἐλαία in Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (three volumes; translated from the German; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-1992), 425.

⁴⁰ J. Graham Miller, "The Two Olive Trees – A Positive View of the Future," *Vox Reformata* 52 (1989): 4.

along with believing Israelites of ‘the fat root of the olive’, which is the Abrahamic blessing.”⁴¹

Yet it is possible that Paul has more in mind in the use of this particular illustration. The process that he is describing is one that is actually used in horticulture in the Middle East, but only in exceptional circumstances. Under such conditions, writes John Stott, “. . . ‘it is customary to reinvigorate an olive tree which is ceasing to bear fruit by grafting it with a shoot of the wild-olive, so that the sap of the tree ennobles this wild shoot and the tree now again begins to bear fruit.’ Paul’s reference, therefore, is not to ‘the ordinary process of grafting the young olive tree’ but to the method of invigorating a decadent olive-tree.”⁴²

If this last interpretation is correct, Paul’s illustration becomes very apt. The olive tree that is Israel (in terms of 9:6) is reduced to a remnant (v. 5). Natural branches were broken off (vv. 17-21) and branches from a wild olive tree (Gentiles) were grafted in (vv. 17, 24). From this allegory Paul draws two complementary conclusions: Firstly, as unnatural branches the Gentiles should not become arrogant and conceited (vv. 18, 20), for then they run the risk of being cut off (vv. 21-22). Secondly, if the Jews do not persist in their unbelief, then as natural branches they can be grafted back into their own olive tree (vv. 23-24).

(iii) The Future Majority of Israel (vv. 25-32):

The hope that is held out for Jewish restoration (vv. 23-24) will one day be realised, namely when “the full number of the Gentiles comes in” (v. 25). It is then that “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26). This glorious future for the majority of the Jews was already hinted at in the previous section:

⁴¹ Donald W. B. Robinson, “The Salvation of Israel in Romans 9-11,” *The Reformed Theological Review* 26 (1967): 90.

⁴² Stott, *Romans*, 300 (citing Sir William Ramsey’s *Pauline and Other Studies* [1906], 217ff).

But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, now much greater riches will their fullness bring (v. 12).

For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead? (v. 15).

Hence the future fullness and acceptance of the Jews will bring greater riches and life from the dead. However these blessings are to be precisely understood,⁴³ more would appear to be in store than has already been realised in Paul's Gentile mission.

Paul now begins to draw to a close his discussion of the questions that have occupied his mind throughout Rom 9-11: How can the doctrine of justification by faith be true, if that message has been rejected by those for whom it was originally intended? Have God's purposes failed if Israel as a whole has rejected the gospel? If this is the case, does the gospel really demonstrate the justice of God?

In Romans 11 Paul answers these questions at two levels: (a) Not all Jews have rejected the gospel, since even at the present time there is still a remnant of believing Jews (vv. 1-10); (b) In the future that remnant will grow to what can safely be termed "all Israel" (vv. 11-32). God is not yet finished with his ancient covenant people. His word has not failed (9:6).

When we compare Romans 9 and 11 we discover that God's word is indeed a two-edged sword. It cuts both ways. The principle of reversal works in two directions. It surprises and silences the Jews in

⁴³ The expression "life from the dead" has especially divided interpreters. Understood literally it would be a reference to the general resurrection of the dead that accompanies the Parousia (thus Barrett, Bruce, Cranfield, Dunn, Moo, Sanday and Headlam, Schreiner). If it is taken metaphorically it could refer to a worldwide spiritual awakening, "an unprecedented quickening for the world in the expansion and success of the gospel" (Murray, *Romans*, 2:84; cf. the comments by Hodge, Morris, Stott *in loc.*). Another possibility would be that this expression be understood in terms of Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the dry bones (Ezek 37:1-14), which envisages the restoration of the house of Israel. This would make "life from the dead" a metaphor for the salvation of Israel.

chapter 9. Now in chapter 11 Paul uses the very same principle to surprise and silence the Gentiles. As Frank Thielman explains:

It also silences Gentile Christians, now in the majority in Rome, who have used their newly gained positions of power to disenfranchise their fellow Jewish believers both socially (chapters 14 and 15) and theologically (chapter 11). This is Paul's concern in 11:10-32 where he carries on a dialogue not only with Jews but with Gentiles, and the subject of debate is not the inclusion of Gentiles within God's people but the inclusion of Israel. It is not accidental that in 11:26, at the climax of his argument, Paul recalls a statement in one of his favorite sections of Isaiah that refers to the redeemer who will turn godlessness away from *Jacob*. In 9:13 'Jacob' referred primarily to Gentiles, chosen for inclusion among God's people by an act of God's sovereign mercy; but in 11:25-26, the only other occurrence of the name in the Pauline correspondence, 'Jacob' refers primarily to Jews, now also included within God's people by an unexpected act of divine mercy. Unbelieving Israel is now the second born and the unexpected candidate for God's mercy, and believing Israel is, apparently at least in Rome, the weaker party (14:1-2, 15:1). Thus Paul warns the Gentile majority in the Roman church not to head into a heady ethnocentrism of their own, whether toward unbelieving Israel (11:20) or toward believing Jews in their midst (12:3, 16; 14:1-2, 10; 15:1, 7-12), since God is able to break the bonds of cultural and ethnic expectations again and show mercy to unbelieving Israel (11:24).⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Thielman, "Unexpected Mercy," 179.
Vox Reformata, 68

Thomas Schreiner has written in a similar vein:

God has designed salvation history in such a way that the extension of his saving grace surprises those who are its recipients. Gentiles were elected to salvation when the Jews were expecting to be the special objects of his favor, and the Jews will be grafted in again at a time in which Gentiles will be tempted to believe that they are superior to ethnic Israel. By constructing history in such a way God makes it evident that he deserves the praise for the inclusion of any into his saving promises.⁴⁵

(iv) Closing Doxology (vv. 33-36):

When Paul has concluded his contemplations of God's mysterious dealings with both the Jews and the Gentiles, he breaks out into one of the most majestic doxologies to be found anywhere in the NT:

³³ *Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!*

*How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!*

³⁴ *“Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?”*

³⁵ *“Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay him?”*

³⁶ *For from him and through him and to him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.*

The implied answer to the rhetorical questions in vv. 34-35 is of course: *Nobody!* If God's will for the Jews and Gentiles is inscrutable and beyond comprehension, then how careful and modest we should be in our exegesis and how tentative in our conclusions! Yet these very questions provide the best possible key to our exegesis, as both are quotations from the OT. In a section that is

⁴⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 622.

studded with citations from Scripture this is bound to be significant. There is a sense in which all of Paul's appeals to Scripture climax precisely at this point. Not only is he lost in wonder, awe and praise in this magnificent doxological outburst, but he also very carefully draws his argument to a resounding conclusion.

In verse 34 Paul quotes Isa 40:12 (LXX). The original context of this question is quite revealing. The section in which it stands contemplates the grandeur of God as Creator (vv. 12-26), but the chapter as a whole introduces a new phase of his work as Redeemer. Here the New Exodus is introduced. The people will be brought back from captivity. Restoration is promised (vv. 1-11). This is the gospel in the OT.⁴⁶ God's dealings with his people are incomprehensible, as are his ways in creation. Hence Paul's quote is brilliantly contextual. The OT Gospel – that God would restore his people from the Babylonian captivity – has its origin in the unfathomable designs of God. The NT Gospel – which would by now seem to include the ultimate restoration of Israel – is likewise rooted in the mind of a God whose thoughts are beyond human comprehension.

When Paul asks, “Who has ever given to God, that God should repay him?” (v. 35), he is drawing from Job 41:11. This quote forms part of God's final challenge to Job. Job 41 seems little more than an elaborate description of the form and strength of a crocodile (assuming this is the correct identification of “the leviathan” in v. 1). The graphic description has a sobering effect on Job and puts him firmly in his place (Job 42:1-6). God does not directly answer Job or his friends, but has them reflect on one of the mightiest and most fearsome of his creatures. Only at vv. 10-11 (the very point from which Paul cites) is there any comparison with God, or is the point of the illustration explained. If no man in his right mind dares to disturb a crocodile, then who is able to stand against God or make a claim

⁴⁶ In the LXX the noun εὐαγγέλιον is never used in a redemptive sense. The same cannot be said of its cognate verb εὐαγγελίζομαι. In Isa 40-66 it carries particularly strong soteriological overtones (40:9; 52:7; 60:6; 61:1). It is precisely here – in Isaiah's New Exodus – that the taproot to the NT gospel is to be found.

against him? Perhaps ironically, and no doubt importantly, it is in the next chapter that Job's fortunes are restored.

That Paul should parallel God's dealings with Job to those with Israel has to be highly significant. In both cases God's ways are inscrutable. Who are we to question them? It is a most appropriate quotation for Paul to use in the conclusion to his intricate discussion. His doxological outburst draws on highly relevant OT passages. God's dealings with Jerusalem and with Job ultimately lead to their restoration (Isa 40-66; Job 42). It would seem that Paul is quoting these passages not only because they are particularly appropriate to the point he is making, but also because their wider contexts support his restoration theme.

2.3 Evaluation

From the above discussion it has become clear that Paul's current circumstances and those of his readers (insofar as they can be determined) have a direct bearing on the argument in Romans 9-11. From his own personal situation it is not difficult to understand why Paul should now be so preoccupied with the salvation of his fellow Jews. He is poised to take personal delivery of the Gentile offering, which has now been accumulating over of a number of years, for the impoverished Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. His Roman readers, on the other hand, are predominantly Gentile believers who are now prone to regard Jews with some degree of condescension.

In Romans 9-11 Paul explains from the OT why his missionary activity in the Eastern Mediterranean has enjoyed such spectacular success among the Gentiles, while at the same time bearing such apparently meagre fruit among the Jews. This result might suggest that God has rejected the Jews, but that would be a false conclusion. Paul's Gentile readers need to learn that God's ancient people will yet experience spiritual restoration. Although their response to the gospel has thus far been largely negative, God's purpose for the Jews has not been thwarted. This consideration, Paul urges, should guard

against spiritual arrogance on the part of the Gentiles. The Jews still have a place in God's plan. They will be restored.

Both the historical background and literary context to Romans 11:25-27 would therefore seem to point in the direction of Jewish restoration. This would also seem to be the theme of some of the major OT contexts from which Paul has drawn his quotations. The historical, literary and scriptural evidence all appears to be lining up in favour of the view that Paul is anticipating a spiritual restoration for Israel. So much can be gleaned from the context. For the nature, scope and timing of this restoration, however, we will need to consider the verses in question.

3. *A Suggested Solution*

Only a careful exegesis of the Rom 11:25-26 will enable us to determine with any degree of confidence what kind of restoration is yet to be expected, and when such a restoration is likely to take place. No attempt to "rethink Israel" on a NT basis can afford to bypass these crucial verses.

Verse 25: I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.

Paul opens his new paragraph with an expression denoting a certain degree of emphasis - *I do not want you to be ignorant* (cf. Rom 1:13; 1 Cor 10:1; 12:1; 1 Thess 4:13). "It is a formula," writes Cranfield, "which Paul uses when he wishes to bring home to his readers with emphasis something which he regards as of special importance."⁴⁷ Reidar Hvalvik has taken matters further in that he identifies it as a "disclosure formula" that is found in many Greek papyrus letters. This formula can be used at a major point of transition or within the main body of the letter. It does not necessarily introduce a new topic or information that is totally

⁴⁷ Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:573.

unknown to the readers. Rather it marks the introduction of a subject that must not be overlooked. This would seem to be the case here: “This is undoubtedly the function of the formula in Rom. 11.25 too. To make sure that his readers have grasped the consequences of what he has already written, Paul engages their attention by using the disclosure formula.”⁴⁸

Paul is therefore beginning to draw out the consequences of his preceding argument. These consequences are clearly a matter of special importance. But in this instance he refers to it somewhat tantalizingly as *this mystery*. What precisely does this mystery consist of? There are four possibilities:

- (a) that Israel has experienced a hardening in part;
- (b) that the full number of the Gentiles will come in;
- (c) that all Israel will be saved;
- (d) all of the above.

A decision cannot be made until we have some clarity on the meaning of the Greek word *mysterion* which Paul uses here. It does not have exactly the same meaning as the English word ‘mystery’, although this is always the way the Greek word is translated in the NT. So we need to exercise some caution. The NT word does not carry the usual modern sense of ‘puzzle’. It is not as though you can follow a series of clues and hints so as to unravel the mystery. You are not to read the NT as you would a “thriller”. Perhaps the best dictionary definition of *mysterion* is that it is “a *secret* or *mystery* too profound for human ingenuity” (Bauer).⁴⁹ Because of the unfolding of God’s plan of redemption some mysteries have become ‘open secrets’ for those who believe, e.g. the kingdom of God (Matt 13:11; Mark 4:11; Luke 8:10), the Gospel (Rom.16:25; Eph.6:19), the incorporation of the Gentiles into the people of God (Eph 3:1-10; Col 1:26,27), and even Christ himself (Col 2:2; 4:3). What was formerly

⁴⁸ Reidar Hvalvik, “A ‘Sonderweg’ for Israel: A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11.25-27,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38 (1990): 99.

⁴⁹ Cf. the definition offered by Cranfield, *Romans*, 2: 573: “. . . something which could not be known by men except by divine revelation, but which, though once hidden, is now revealed in Christ and is to be proclaimed so that all who have ears to hear may hear it. The word has strong apocalyptic associations.”

hidden (and therefore mysterious) has now been disclosed. At the same time there are mysteries which are still to be fully revealed, such as the transformation of our bodies at the resurrection (1 Cor 15:51) and God's future dealings with Israel (Rom 11:25).⁵⁰ In Romans 11 the partial hardening of Israel creates room for the conversion of the Gentiles. After the acceptance of the Gentiles all Israel will be saved. But precisely what this means and how God will bring it about have not yet been fully disclosed to us. One day – perhaps very soon – this *mysterion* will also become an “open secret”, but till then an element of mystery remains.⁵¹

The precise nature of the mystery does not lie in (a), (b) or (c), nor even in (d), but rather in the correlation of (a), (b) and (c).⁵² It would seem that the partial hardening that has happened to Israel comes to an end when the fullness of the Gentiles has come in (v. 25) and when all Israel will be saved (v. 26a). But does this mean that the hardening will not cease till every Gentile is saved who will be saved? And how does this relate to the Deliverer coming from Zion? Will Israel be saved at the Parousia, after the acceptance of the Gentiles?⁵³

If Paul does not unravel the mystery for his readers, then why does he want them to be aware of it? The reason is clear – *so that you may not be conceited*. The mystery is introduced to guard against Gentile arrogance and complacency (vv. 18, 20). As Schreiner

⁵⁰ Cf. Harding, “Salvation of Israel,” 66: “The ‘mystery’ about which Paul speaks is not some new revelation, but pertains to the unfolding significance of venerable prophetic oracles regarding the saving intention of God with respect to Israel and the Gentiles.”

⁵¹ Seyoon Kim, “The ‘Mystery’ of Rom 11.25-6 Once More,” *New Testament Studies* 43 (1997): 422, argues that Paul obtained the ‘mystery’ from his Damascus road experience: “the fact that the ‘mystery’ is neatly explained in the combined light of Isa 49 and Isa 6 . . . contributes to my thesis that Paul indeed interpreted his Damascus experience in the light of Isa 6 as well as Isa 49 and obtained the ‘mystery’ thereby.” This conclusion depends on a string of inferences. Because of its speculative nature it seems to have gained little scholarly support (cf. Hvalvik, “‘Sonderweg’,” 98, who dismisses this view as “pure conjecture, and far from convincing”).

⁵² Cf. Hvalvik, “‘Sonderweg’,” 97; Stott, *Romans*, 302; Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 249.

⁵³ Thus *EDNT* 2:488.

explains: “The mystery is divulged so that the Gentiles will not fall prey to pride and give glory to themselves rather than to the glorious and infinitely wise God.”⁵⁴ Sadly, it is now a fact of history that Paul’s timely warnings against Gentile pride and conceit have all too often gone unheeded. “Anti-Semitism has lurked within the visible Church as a persistent expression of this spiritual disease.”⁵⁵ Two periods of church history may be singled out for attention.

When the Roman Empire was Christianised during the fourth century, relations between Christians and Jews were ambivalent at best. The lot of the Jews, if anything, was less favourable than it had been during the preceding pagan period. Moreover, it seems that less antagonism came their way from the political leaders than from the newly empowered bishops. It would appear that much of the anti-Jewish sentiment expressed by Christians in the second half of the fourth century stemmed from the canons of the Church Councils and the preaching of the Church Fathers. In 386-387, for example, the Church Father John Chrysostom directed eight sermons against Judaising Christians in Antioch. Stephen Center further points out:

Comments by other Church Fathers, including Aphrahat, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzen, though less virulent than those made by Chrysostom, still displayed their hostile views concerning Jews. Even Jerome, who had a close association with Jews, displayed his hostility to Jews in his commentaries. Augustine was deprecatory toward Jews yet declared that they must not die out. They must be preserved to represent the old order, the one existing prior to the birth of Jesus, for the sake of the Christians. They “must be dispersed about the world as living testimony of God’s displeasure” because they crucified Jesus.⁵⁶

During the time of the Reformation the disease of anti-Semitism also affected Martin Luther – and ultimately with disastrous

⁵⁴ Schreiner, *Romans*, 614,

⁵⁵ Miller, “The Two Olive Trees,” 4.

⁵⁶ Stephen Center, “The Jews under Roman Rule in the Fourth Century,” *Society for the Study of Early Christianity Newsletter* 42 (February 2002): 6.

consequences. Early in his ministry he seems to have had a real concern for the salvation of Jews. A number of them became Christians, although not very many. It appears that he eventually lost patience with them and gave up on them. In his *Table-Talk* he sounds openly anti-Semitic: “But the Jews are so hardened that they listen to nothing; though overcome by testimonies, they yield not an inch. ’Tis a pernicious race, oppressing all men by their usury and rapine . . . We must ever keep on our guard against them.”⁵⁷ It was against attitudes such as this that Paul had warned his Gentile readers again and again in Romans 11.

From the discouraging response that he received from his Jewish contemporaries Luther should also have been reminded *that Israel has experienced a hardening in part*. From Paul’s earlier discussion it has become clear that Israel’s hardening is not total. Even “at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace” (v. 6). Particularly relevant is v. 7: “What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.” Since this hardening excludes the elect remnant of Jews, it has always been *partial* in nature.

Not only is this hardening partial in nature, it is also *temporary* in extent. It lasts *until the full number of the Gentiles has come in*. In other words, “within God’s salvation plan the ‘full number’ of the Gentiles is the ‘pre-requisite’ for the saving of all Israel (vv. 11, 26).”⁵⁸ But precisely what does the expression *full number* (πλήρωμα) mean? The same Greek word was used of the Jews in v. 12. There the NIV translates it as “fulness”: “But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their *fulness* bring!”

Now it would be fair to say – at the very least – that this fulness of the Jews in vs. 12 is synonymous with all Israel being saved in vs. 26. In this chapter there are therefore two significant references to fulness: (a) the fulness of the Jews (vv. 12, 26), and (b) the fulness of

⁵⁷ *The Table-Talk or Familiar Discourse of Martin Luther* (translated by William Hazlitt; London: David Bogue, 1848), 352.

⁵⁸ *EDNT* 3:111.

the Gentiles (v. 25). But of course the principle of reversal, first enunciated in chapter 9, is still in effect. God may have chosen Israel as his covenant people in the OT, but now in the NT era the fulness of the Gentiles comes first, and then the fulness of the Jews. The temporal force of the word “until” can hardly be minimised. It implies that “the hardening of the majority of Israel will be lifted *after* the full number of Gentiles are saved.”⁵⁹

This of course raises several important chronological questions. Does Paul mean that every Gentile believer has to be saved (i.e. come into the kingdom⁶⁰) before “all Israel” can be saved? Does the *full number (fulness) of the Gentiles* refer to every last believing Gentile? Does it mean the grand total of all Gentile believers? Such an interpretation could be pushing the Greek word for *fulness* too hard here. It does not always necessarily always mean “sum total” (cf. BAGD). Just as the fulness of the Jews is not intended to include every single Jew, so the fulness of the Gentiles is not intended to include the last believing Gentile. An analogy from contemporary English may help here. When we say, “This glass is full of water,” we do not necessarily mean that the glass is full to the brim. Similarly, in this verse it is sufficient to hold that God’s dealings with the Gentiles have reached a certain level of fulfilment. God’s promises to the Gentiles as a whole have now been fulfilled. All peoples of the earth have now been blessed through God’s covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:3; cf. Rom 4). The vastness of what is envisaged here should not be underestimated. As Graham Miller explains:

Fulness is a big estimate of God’s success in His mission to the gentiles. It means the ‘full complement’, the essential majority, the great bulk of gentiles living at the time when God moves mightily among them to constrain the ultimate revival of Church history. The astonishing advance of the Early Church, the mighty winds of the Reformation, the

⁵⁹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 618.

⁶⁰ Cf. Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:576: “The use of εἰσερχεσθαι [to enter in] is reminiscent of the tradition of the teaching of Jesus, which contains many references to entering into the kingdom of God or into life . . . The verb is seldom used by Paul, and he uses it in this pregnant sense nowhere but here.”

kindled enthusiasm of the Evangelical Revival will then look like tiny anticipations of the final ingathering, wrought by the same almighty God.⁶¹

When God's mighty work among the Gentiles is essentially complete, the next phase of his global program of redemption will come into effect.

Verses 26-27: *And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:*

***“The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.***

***²⁷ And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”***

And so all Israel will be saved: Here we return to the “storm centre” referred to at the beginning of this article. To employ the other metaphor found in the opening paragraph, this is the thorniest of the hedgehog's prickles. The problem begins with the two seemingly innocuous little words *And so*. They could be interpreted in one of two ways:

- (a) The reference could be to the *manner* in which Israel is saved. This is explained by the previous verse. They are hardened in part, but there will come a time when that hardening is lifted: “*And so* all Israel will be saved.” Paul's thought would then pick up from the idea of partial hardening in v. 25. This is how the majority of English translations render the expression.⁶²
- (b) The reference could be to the *time* when Israel is saved. Paul's thought would then pick up from the last clause in the previous verse: “until the full number of the Gentiles has come in”. A minority of English translations and paraphrases take the expression in this temporal sense.⁶³

⁶¹ Miller, “The Two Olive Trees,” 5. Since these words were written (1989) the revival in China graphically illustrates the claim being made.

⁶² E.g. “And so” (KJV, NIV, NRSV, RSV); “And thus” (NASB); “And in this way” (ESV); “And this is how” (TEV).

⁶³ E.g. “and then after this” (JB); “when this has happened” (NEB); “And then” (LB); “Once this has happened” (Phillips).

Although some interpreters firmly insist that the underlying Greek expression (καὶ οὕτως) never has a temporal meaning,⁶⁴ it is difficult to make a choice between these two alternatives. It is not impossible that the word οὕτως in this instance doubles as both an adverb of manner (*so, thus*) and an adverb of time (*then*). Within the context of Paul's immediate argument it is clear that he is asking two questions. First he asks, *How* will all Israel be saved? His answer is in v. 25: By the removal of the partial hardening it has been experiencing. His second question is, *When* will all Israel be saved? Again his answer is in v. 25: When the fulness of the Gentiles has come in. At the beginning of v. 26 Paul is therefore picking up both these strands of thought from v. 25. He is addressing both the manner and the time of the salvation of all Israel. While the emphasis may be on the manner of Israel's salvation, the time element cannot be excluded.⁶⁵ Hvalvik perceptively embraces both meanings in what he calls the "logical" sense of the expression. His conclusion tersely captures the essence

⁶⁴ Thus Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 249-250: "Despite repeated assertions to the contrary, the meaning of οὕτως is not 'then' but 'thus', 'in this manner'. Paul's meaning is not a temporal sequence – first the Gentiles, *then* the Jews." Merkle, "Romans 11," 716, is equally insistent: "οὕτως never has temporal significance." Likewise Hendriksen, *Romans*, 379: "οὕτως does not mean *then* or *after that*." Against such confident assertions is the recent study by Pieter W. van der Horst, "'Only Then Will All Israel Be Saved': A Short Note on the Meaning of καὶ οὕτως in Romans 11:26," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 521-525. By carefully marshalling evidence from such writers as Thucydides, Plato, Xenophon and Epictetus, as well as from authors of Judeo-Greek literature and the NT (Acts 7:8; 20:11; 27:17; 1 Thess 4:16-17), he challenges the common consensus. From these examples he seeks to prove that "the temporal sense is more widespread than is commonly assumed and therefore a much more serious alternative to the modal meaning than most translations and commentaries would have us believe" (521). His purpose is not to exclude the possibility of the modal sense in Rom 11:26, but to exclude "the use of the false argument that it is impossible to take οὕτως in the temporal sense because this is 'not found otherwise in Greek' (Fitzmyer)" (524-525).

⁶⁵ Thus Herman Ridderbos, *Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament: Aan de Romeinen* (Kok: Kampen, 1959), 264: "καὶ οὕτως receives all the emphasis, because the mystery lies in the manner of Israel's salvation. These words do indeed also have a temporal connotation: *and then*. Nevertheless καὶ οὕτως is not synonymous with καὶ τότε. The 'then' is implied in ἀκριβῶς. The word 'so' does not only mean that the salvation of all Israel depends on the Gentiles entering in, but also – and especially – that the two are intimately connected, both temporally and materially, cf. vs. 31b, vs. 12" [translation mine].

of Paul's thought at this point: "This means that the salvation of the Gentiles – according to God's plan – is a presupposition and condition for the salvation of 'all Israel'."⁶⁶

All Israel shall be saved: From the earlier discussion of the literary context to this expression, it has become clear that, within the broad framework of Paul's argument in Romans 9-11, *Israel* is used consistently in an ethnic sense. He is speaking of those who are Jews by race and children of Abraham by descent. In his discussion he refers to *Israel* no less than 11x (9:6 [*bis*], 27 [*bis*], 31; 10:19, 21; 11:2, 7, 25, 26). Even though he makes a distinction in 9:6, it is not between Jews and Gentiles. Rather he is referring to an Israel within Israel ("Not all who are [descended] from Israel are Israel"). Most telling for our exegesis is the fact that *Israel* has been explicitly distinguished from the Gentiles as recently as v. 25. It is difficult to believe that without warning Paul would change the meaning of such a key term within the space of a single sentence.⁶⁷

Another factor that needs to be taken into account is the fact that in Paul's correspondence *Israel* is not found in isolation, but belongs to a wider semantic field. According to a careful study done by Michael Bachmann, Paul uses *Israel* and related terms in nuanced yet precise ways. From an exhaustive study of the relevant Greek terms within the Pauline corpus, Bachmann draws the following conclusions:

- (a) *Jew, circumcision* and *seed of Abraham* can be used of both believing and unbelieving Jews, as well as of Gentile Christians;
- (b) *sons, children and heirs of God* are used of believing Jews and Gentiles (and perhaps by extension of unbelieving Jews);
- (c) *people of God* and *my people* are used of unbelieving and believing Jews (and perhaps by extension of believing Gentiles);
- (d) *Israelite* is used mainly of Jewish Christians, never of Gentile Christians;

⁶⁶ Hvalvik, "Sonderweg", 97.

⁶⁷ *Contra* Merkle, "Romans 11," 720, who – on the analogy of 9:6 - sees no reason "why Paul could not shift the meaning of Israel within two verses – the first reference to the nation of Israel as a whole and the second to the elect within the nation of Israel."

(e) *Israel* is used of ethnic Israel – whether believers or unbelievers – never of Gentile Christians (not even in Rom 11:26 or Gal 6:16!).⁶⁸

Within this constellation of terms both *Israel* and *Israelite* have a very well defined (and hence restricted) meaning. In neither case is the meaning extended to include believing Gentiles.⁶⁹ Strictly speaking it is therefore incorrect to speak of the church as “the new Israel.” True to Pauline usage, it would be far more correct to say that the church is made up of Israel and believing Gentiles who have been grafted into Israel.⁷⁰

Granted that Paul has ethnic Jews in mind when he speaks of *Israel*, it still needs to be determined what he meant by *all Israel*. As Paul is about to quote from the LXX (as he frequently does throughout this section), it would be wise to check this expression against septuagintal usage. In the LXX we find Samuel assembling *all Israel* at Mizpah (1 Sam 7:5) and *all Israel* again assembling to mourn for him when he died (1 Sam 25:1). *All Israel* went to Shechem to make Rehoboam king (1 Kings 12:1), only to join him later in abandoning the law of the Lord (2 Chron 12:1). In the same vein Daniel complained that *all Israel* had transgressed God’s law (Dan 9:11). On the basis of this evidence Cranfield concludes that *all Israel* in

⁶⁸ Michael Bachmann, “*Verus Israel*: Ein Vorschlag zu einer ‘mengentheoretischen’ Neubeschreibung der betreffenden paulinischen Terminologie,” *New Testament Studies* 48 (2002): 500-512.

⁶⁹ Bachmann, “*Verus Israel*,” 510, underscores the unique usage of these terms within their semantic field: “The term ‘Israel’ (and the corresponding ‘Israelite’) – at least beyond Gal 6:16 – is used exclusively by the apostle to refer to actual Jews and its meaning is never extended to include non-Jews. In contrast to the concepts considered earlier, this usage stands alone as far as the history of the tradition is concerned” [translation mine].

⁷⁰ Craig A. Blasing, “The Future of Israel as a Theological Question,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 44 (2001): 447, makes a pointed observation in this regard: “The Church is not an essentially Gentile construct, even though since the second century, the majority of Christians have been Gentiles. Thinking of itself as Gentile and seeing itself as the replacement of Israel has been the source of political misconstruals of the nature and mission of the Church. It is most important for an ecclesiology that keeps in view God’s future for Israel to recover the meaning of the Church as a fellowship anticipating the coming establishment of the kingdom in all its fullness for Israel and Gentiles.”

these instances is “the nation as a whole, but not necessarily every individual member.”⁷¹

So both the immediate context (Rom 9-11) and the broader biblical context (Pauline usage and the LXX) would suggest that *all Israel* refers to ethnic Israel as a whole, though not necessarily to every last Jew. Hence Paul would seem to be teaching that at some time in the future the majority of ethnic Jews (not necessarily equivalent to the current nation state of Israel⁷²) will be saved.⁷³ This is what he had referred to earlier in the chapter as “their fullness” (v. 12), “their acceptance” (v. 15), and their being grafted back into their own olive tree (vv. 23-24). It is a bold prophecy and one for which he immediately adduces scriptural support:

as it is written:

*“The deliverer will come from Zion;
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
27 And this is my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”*

Although Paul explicitly claims to be quoting from Scripture, his manner of citing the OT in this instance is quite problematic. Margins and footnotes in English study Bibles will inform the careful reader that the source of the quote can be found in Isa 59:20-21 and 27:9. But should this careful reader be diligent enough to check the Isaiah passages, it will soon be apparent that in English the quotation and its sources bear little resemblance to one another.

⁷¹ Cranfield, *Romans*, 2:576.

⁷² F. F. Bruce, *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1963), 221, makes a sober comment about the restoration of Israel in this context: “. . . in all that Paul says about the restoration of Israel to God, he says nothing about the restoration of an earthly Davidic kingdom, nothing about national reinstatement in the land of Israel. What he envisaged for his people was infinitely better.” Cf. Stott, *Romans*, 304: “It is not a national salvation, for nothing is said about either a political entity or a return to the land. Nor is there any hint of a special way of salvation for the Jews which dispenses with faith in Christ.”

⁷³ Cf. Robinson, “Salvation of Israel,” 84: “The promise of Isa 45:17 that ‘Israel shall be saved of the LORD with an everlasting salvation’ will yet be fulfilled, when, no mere rump of the nation, but ‘all Israel’ will be saved (11:26).”

The discrepancies are such that some scholars are inclined to believe that Paul is not directly quoting from the OT at this point. An example is Christopher Stanley who suggests that “Paul has drawn his quotation in Rom. 11.25-26 not directly from the Jewish Scriptures, but rather from a Jewish oral tradition in which Isa. 59.20 and Isa. 27.9 had already been conflated and adapted to give voice to a particular interpretation of Yahweh’s coming intervention on behalf of his oppressed people Israel.”⁷⁴ While Stanley advances a plausible argument for his view, in the nature of the case it cannot be proved, as it depends on the existence of an oral tradition for which hard historical evidence is lacking. It also assumes that Paul has deviated from the OT text in what can only be described as “a seemingly insignificant and unmotivated change.”⁷⁵ Such a use of Scripture sounds suspiciously un-Pauline. There must be a better solution.

Although in English translation there seem to be irreconcilable differences between Rom 11:26-27 and Isa 59:20-21; 27:9, these differences are significantly reduced when one compares Paul’s Greek text to that of the LXX (rather than to the Hebrew). Now the connections between Paul and his sources appear much clearer. Three features can be detected:

- (a) Paul’s first three lines are a word-for-word quote from Isa 59:20-21 (LXX):

*The deliverer will come from Zion:
he will turn godlessness away from Jacob.
And this is my covenant with them;*⁷⁶

- (b) The last line (*when I take away their sins*) is a slight modification of Isa 27:9 (in that *his sin* now reads *their sins*);⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Christopher D. Stanley, “‘The Redeemer Will Come ἐκ Σιων’: Romans 11:26-27 Revisited,” in Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders eds., *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* (JSNTSupp 83; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 126.

⁷⁵ Stanley, “The Redeemer Will Come,” 133.

⁷⁶ The LXX reads:

ἦξει ἕνεκεν Σιων ὁ ῥυόμενος καὶ ἀποστρέψει ἀσεβείας ἀπὸ Ἰακωβ. ²¹ καὶ αὕτη αὐτοῖς ἢ παρ’ ἐμοῦ διαθήκη.

Paul’s quote reads:

ἦξει ἐκ Σιων ὁ ῥυόμενος, ἀποστρέψει ἀσεβείας ἀπὸ Ἰακώβ.
²⁷ καὶ αὕτη αὐτοῖς ἢ παρ’ ἐμοῦ διαθήκη.

- (c) The only exception of note is that Isaiah's "*on behalf of Zion*" (LXX) or "*to Zion*" (Hebrew) for Paul becomes "*from Zion*," a phrase which he seems to have imported from Psalm 14:7.

This is therefore an example of a merged quotation, a feature not uncommon in Paul. Earlier in his discussion we see such a quotation in Rom 9:33 where Isa 8:14 is embedded into Isa 28:16. A careful examination of this composite quotation indicates that Paul has chosen his sources carefully, quotes both verses in context, and advances his overall theme in a highly creative and effective way (cf. 1 Pet 2:6-8). The present case is admittedly more complex, but the same principles apply. An examination of the three contexts from which Paul draws clearly indicates that Paul is not citing at random, but is developing his theme with great precision and skill:

- (a) *Isaiah 59* is a passage with which Paul is obviously familiar. He has already quoted vv. 7-8 in Rom 3:15-17. The chapter covers the topics of sin (vv. 1-8), confession (vv. 9-15a) and redemption (vv. 15b-21). The situation that Isaiah portrays is so desperate that there was no justice (v. 15), nor even anyone to intercede (v. 16). (It is a situation very similar to the one described by Paul in Rom 1:18-3:20.) Then the Lord works salvation (v. 16) and the Redeemer comes to Zion (v. 20). He also sends his Spirit (v. 21).
- (b) *Isaiah 27* is a chapter about the deliverance of Israel (possibly from the Babylonian captivity). Those who were perishing and exiled will come and worship the Lord in Jerusalem. They will come from the Euphrates, Egypt and Assyria (vv. 12-13).
- (c) *Psalms 14* describes the folly and wickedness of men and the oppression of God's people (vv. 4-6). In v. 7 the Psalmist prays "that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion." This is the time "when the Lord restores his people," perhaps suggesting exile and captivity. Again this is a passage with which Paul is obviously familiar, having quoted vv. 1-3 in Rom 3:15-17. Hence the chain of OT quotations that make up Rom 3:10-18 is largely accounted for by Isa 59 and Psa 14.

⁷⁷ The LXX reads: ὅταν ἀφέλωμαι αὐτοῦ τὴν ἁμαρτίαν.
Paul's quote reads: ὅταν ἀφέλωμαι τὰς ἁμαρτίας αὐτῶν.

The contexts from which Paul is quoting clearly indicate that he is not plucking some verses at random from here and there in the OT. All three passages speak of Jacob suffering judgement and/or oppression, but they also share the common denominator of restoration and salvation. In each case the Lord is going to restore the fortunes of Jacob. Paul's point would then be that the Lord is going to do this for Israel once again. He is going to reverse "their transgression," "their loss" (v. 12) and "their rejection" (v. 15). He will graft the natural branches back into their own olive tree (v. 24). To prove his point from Scripture Paul succinctly brings together three passages that explicitly teach the restoration of Jacob. As if to underscore this emphasis further, he again quotes passages with restoration themes in his closing doxology (vv. 34-35).

Needless to say, the restoration of which Paul speaks is spiritual in nature. The promised deliverer will turn godlessness away from Jacob and forgive the sins of the people (vv. 26-27), and God's plan culminates when he shows mercy to all (v. 32), including the Jews (v. 31).⁷⁸ Again there is nothing in this context to suggest a national or political restoration, nor is there any reference to the Jews returning to the land of Israel. Any such restoration is simply not within Paul's prophetic line of vision.

But if the restoration of which he speaks is of a spiritual nature, the question does need to be asked as to when such a restoration can be expected to take place. When the passages from which Paul quotes (namely Isa 59, 27; Psa 14) are understood in their original setting, they would seem to have had an immediate fulfilment. The coming of a deliverer refers to the restoration of God's people after the exile (or some such event). Yahweh is the Redeemer of Israel and he restores their fortunes. Paul on the other hand is looking for the ultimate fulfilment of these prophecies and gives them a decidedly christological interpretation. Now Christ is the Deliverer who comes

⁷⁸ Hvalvik, "Sonderweg", 96, also sees links with Rom 4 (especially vv. 4, 7): "These connecting lines clearly indicate that when Paul speaks about the salvation of Israel in 11.25-27, he refers to justification of the ungodly and justification by faith. Israel's salvation is thus nothing else but salvation *sola fide* and *sola gratia*." *Vox Reformata*, 68

from Zion to bring spiritual restoration to the Jewish people. But when does Christ come and when does this restoration occur? Broadly speaking, there are two possibilities:

- (a) The Deliverer coming from Zion is a reference to the first coming of Christ. This is John Stott's view:

This was, in Isaiah's original, a reference to Christ's first coming . . . The deliverer would come to bring his people to repentance and so to forgiveness, according to God's covenant promise. It is clear from this that the 'salvation' of Israel for which Paul has prayed (10:1), to which he will lead his own people by arousing their envy (11:14), which has also come to the Gentiles (11:1; cf. 1:16), and which one day 'all Israel' will experience (11:26), is salvation from sin through Christ.⁷⁹

On this understanding Jesus as the Deliverer has come from Zion (i.e. heaven), but the full effects of his coming are delayed.⁸⁰ "All Israel" is not saved immediately. He will indeed turn godlessness away from Jacob, but in his own good time, i.e. "after the full number of the Gentiles has come in." He will take away their sins, but not yet.

- (b) The reference is to the second coming of Christ. This is Cranfield's view. For him the Deliverer coming from Zion is "a strictly eschatological event."⁸¹ Again "Zion" is associated with the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Heb 12:22). Moo contends that this is why Paul changed Isaiah's phrase to "from Zion": ". . . he probably changes the text in order to make clear that the final

⁷⁹ Stott, *Romans*, 304.

⁸⁰ Cf. Hvalvik, "'Sonderweg,'" 93: "For Paul the Deliverer has already come from Zion . . . God's truthfulness toward his promises are [*sic*] seen in Christ's first coming. There is, however, something which still waits for its fulfillment: 'As far as Israel is concerned, the beneficial effects [of Christ's first coming] are still outstanding and will only be realised when the nation turns to him in faith'" (citing Zeller, *Römer*, 199 [translation mine]).

⁸¹ Cranfield, *Romans*, 2: 578.

deliverance of Israel is accomplished by Christ at his parousia.”⁸² Schreiner argues for this view in greater detail:

In the OT ‘the deliverer’ . . . is certainly Yahweh, but for Paul it is almost certainly Jesus Christ, and the reference is to his second coming as in 1 Thess. 1:10. A reference to the second coming is also supported by the context, for the salvation of Israel occurs after the full number of the Gentiles has come in. The effect of Jesus’ coming will be the removal of ungodliness from Jacob (i.e., Israel). ‘Ungodliness’ . . . here is nothing other than the unbelief mentioned in verse 23. Thus Jesus will remove the unbelief from Israel and grant them faith when he returns.⁸³

On this view the Deliverer coming to Zion is an event that is not only future for Isaiah, but for Paul as well. Therefore it cannot be a reference to Jesus’ earthly ministry. Schreiner lists no less than twenty-two commentators who support his position (including Moo and Cranfield). But is this view correct? Will the effect of Jesus’ second coming be to remove ungodliness from Jacob? Will Jesus indeed grant Israel faith when he returns? Will all Israel be saved by the Lord at his Parousia?

The view that the salvation of Israel is triggered by Jesus’ return is beset by serious problems. It would seem to suggest that all Israel is saved instantly, at the last moment of history as it were. The difficulties with view (b), despite its obvious popularity, compel us to reconsider view (a). *The deliverer will come from Zion* as a reference to Jesus’ first coming can be supported by the following considerations:

- (i) The future verb *will come* need not necessarily mean that what was future for the OT prophet was still future for Paul. In Paul’s earlier discussion there are several examples of prophetic futures where the predicted event had already taken

⁸² Moo, *Romans*, 728.

⁸³ Schreiner, *Romans*, 619-620.

place by the time Paul wrote (9:7, 9, 12, 15, 25-26). Paul is simply retaining the future tense as he found it in the LXX.

- (ii) Isaiah's phrase *to Zion* is altered by Paul to *from Zion* under the influence of Psa 14:7. This is a legitimate change. For Isaiah Yahweh was coming to the earthly Jerusalem. Paul knew that Jesus had come from the heavenly Jerusalem.⁸⁴ The alteration need therefore not be eschatologically motivated. Paul is simply inserting a phrase from a passage that would have been well known for its restoration emphasis.
- (iii) The effects of this coming are not immediate with respect to all Israel. The beneficial effects of Christ's first coming are still outstanding as far as the majority of Israel is concerned. They will be realised when the nation comes to him in faith.⁸⁵
- (iv) Isaiah 59, with its emphasis on sin, confession and redemption, reflects some of Paul's major emphases in Romans. The chapter is quoted here and in Rom 3:15-17, but nowhere else in the NT. The covenant to take away the people's sins, to which Paul refers in v. 27, can be none other than the new covenant in Christ's blood (Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20). The NT never speaks of a covenant in addition to this, nor is there any other way in which sin can be removed.
- (v) Perhaps the strongest argument for the view that Paul is referring to the first coming of Christ is a negative one. Ultimately, the interpretation that this is a reference to the Parousia yields an intolerable sense in this context. As Riddlebarger points out: ". . . the fact that the latter view [(b)] seems to drive a wedge between the manner of salvation associated with the fullness of the Gentiles and that which Israel will enjoy immediately before the consummation is an argument for the former [(a)]."⁸⁶

Although commentators remain divided as to whether Paul's reference to the deliverer coming out of Zion applies to Christ's first

⁸⁴ Cf. Heb 12:22 where worshippers "have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God." Such parlance is not foreign to Paul who in Gal 4:26 speaks of "the Jerusalem that is above," cf. Phil 3:20.

⁸⁵ Hvalvik, "Sonderweg", 93.

⁸⁶ Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism*, 194.

advent or to the Parousia, and although this point is difficult to decide, only the first view does no violence to the context. Christ the Redeemer has come, but the full effects of his coming have yet to be experienced. This is especially the case with those who are Paul's (and also Christ's) "kinsmen according to the flesh" (Rom 9:3 KJV), those of their own race, the people of Israel (9:4). For most of them the greatest blessings still lie in the future, when their Redeemer "will turn godlessness away from Jacob," and when he "takes away their sins." *And so all Israel will be saved!*

When Paul contemplates this prospect at the conclusion of his argument, his tone changes completely. As Riddlebarger has pertinently observed: "Paul began Romans 9 with a heartfelt lament for the state of his people. By the time he ended his discussion of Israel's future in Romans 11 and considered the glorious possibility that God was not finished with Israel, Paul's heart was stirred to a glorious doxology."⁸⁷

Conclusions

The "mystery" of which Paul speaks in Rom 11:25-27 is difficult to unravel. It will never be completely clear until all is revealed in God's good time. In the interim God has not left his people entirely in the dark. From the above discussion the following contours of Israel's future have emerged:

- (a) Since Christ's first coming Israel has experienced a hardening in part. Yet even now there is still "a remnant chosen by grace" (10:5). Hence the hardening of Israel is only partial.
- (b) This hardening is also temporary. It continues "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (v. 25). This seems to refer to a time when the majority of the Gentiles have been saved, rather than to that moment when every last Gentile has entered the kingdom.
- (c) Once this majority of Gentiles has come in, "all Israel will be saved" (v. 26). Again this would appear to be a reference to a

⁸⁷ Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism*, 194.

majority of Israel, to the Jews as a whole, rather than to every single Jew.

- (d) This anticipated salvation of the majority of the Jews has been made possible through Christ's first coming. It was then that he came as the Deliverer from Zion and made a covenant with them to take away their sins. Up till now he has turned godlessness (unbelief) away from only a remnant or minority in Jacob. The time will come when that number is dramatically increased. The trickle will become a torrent.
- (e) When all Israel is saved, then the promises of Rom 11:12, 15 will be fulfilled. Greater riches and life from the dead will accompany – or perhaps follow – the salvation of all Israel. The conversion of the Jews is a blessing worth praying and working for!