

ROMANS 11 AND THE FUTURE OF ETHNIC ISRAEL

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I. INTRODUCTION

The final destiny of ethnic Israel is both a sensitive and important topic. It is sensitive, because it involves real people and real outcomes. It is important, because it involves God's promises and God's integrity. In Romans 11, we find Paul's clearest description of the final destiny of Israel. It is the contention of this author, however, that many who read Romans 11 read into the text a future mass conversion of ethnic Israel. In this paper I will seek to demonstrate that Romans 11, and in particular Rom 11:26, does not teach a future mass conversion of ethnic Israel, but rather that there will always be a remnant of believing Jews until the end of time. After briefly reviewing the three main interpretations of the phrase "all Israel will be saved," I will then examine the reasons why "all Israel" refers to the elect ethnic Jews throughout history. Finally, I will answer some possible objections to this view.

II. THREE INTERPRETATIONS OF "ALL ISRAEL WILL BE SAVED"

The key verse for the interpretation of Romans 11 is found in 26a, "and so all Israel will be saved." In his commentary Douglas Moo states, "the first clause of v. 26 is the storm center in the interpretation of Romans 9–11 and of NT teaching about the Jews and their future."¹ The three main interpretations of the phrase "all Israel will be saved" are as follows: (1) all the elect, both Jew and Gentile; (2) the ethnic nation of Israel as a whole; (3) all the elect of ethnic Israel throughout history.

1. *All the elect, both Jew and Gentile.* Scholars such as Calvin, Jeremias, Barth, and Wright have held this interpretation.² In his commentary on Romans Calvin states, "I extend the word 'Israel' to all the people of God, according to this meaning: when the Gentiles shall come in, the Jews also shall return from their defection to the obedience of faith, and thus shall be completed the salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be

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¹ Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 719.

² This is also the view of Philip E. Hughes, "The Olive Tree of Romans XI," *EvQ* 20 (1948) 44–45; Ralph P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 134; and Hervé Ponsot, "Et Ainsi Tout Israel Sera Sauvé: Rom., XI, 26a," *RB* 89 (1982) 406–417.

gathered from both.”³ Calvin uses Gal 6:16 as part of his defense because there Paul refers to the Church as the “Israel of God.” N. T. Wright, a modern scholar who affirms this view, writes,

What Paul is saying is this. God’s method of saving “all Israel” is to harden ethnic Israel (cp. 9.14ff.), i.e. not to judge her at once, so as to create a period of time during which the gentile mission could be undertaken, *during the course of which* it remains God’s will that the present “remnant” of believing Jews might be enlarged by the process of “jealousy,” and consequent faith. . . . This whole process is God’s way of saving his whole people: that is the meaning of καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται.⁴

2. *The ethnic nation of Israel as a whole.* This second interpretation is by far the majority view. Although there are some who maintain that every individual Jew will be saved,⁵ most simply interpret “all” as referring to ethnic Israel as a whole. That is, “all Israel” refers to the mass of Jews living on the earth at the end of time, who, after the full number of elect Gentiles are gathered in, will be a part of a large-scale mass conversion. This event will take place just previous to (or at the moment of) Christ’s return.⁶ Support for this view comes from the OT and rabbinic literature where the term “all Israel” does not necessarily include every single Israelite.⁷

³ John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 19 (trans. John King; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 437.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 250.

⁵ For example, see Richard Bell, *Provoked to Jealousy: The Origin and Purpose of the Jealousy Motif in Romans 9–11* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1994) 139.

⁶ For the view that Israel will not be converted through the ministry of the church but through Christ himself at his *parousia*, see Otfried Hofius, “All Israel Will Be Saved: Divine Salvation and Israel’s Deliverance in Romans 9–11,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin*, Suppl 1 (1990) 19–39. Hofius states that verse 26b presupposes the general resurrection and argues that the salvation of all Israel will take place at the return of Christ, and through Christ himself. He writes, “All Israel’ is not saved by the preaching of the gospel. By no means, however, does that imply a ‘Sonderweg,’ a way of salvation which bypasses the gospel and faith in Christ! Rather, Israel will hear the gospel from the mouth of Christ himself at his return—the saving word of his self-revelation which effects the faith that takes hold of divine salvation. . . . ‘All Israel’ is thus saved in a different way than the Gentile Christians and the ‘remnant,’ which already believes in Christ, namely, not through the evangelistic preaching of the church. Instead, ‘all Israel’ is saved directly by the Kyrios himself” (36–37). Also see Jennifer Glancy, “Israel vs. Israel in Romans 11:25–32,” *USQR* 45 (1991) 191–203, who takes a similar position. She comments that allusion to the redeemer from Zion in v. 26 “suggests that Israel’s salvation is an event attending to the return of Christ at the *parousia*. . . . The redemption of Israel does not follow their willing conversion to Christianity, but rather occurs through God’s invasion of the human sphere. The catalyst to Israel’s salvation does not seem to be the preaching of the church but an encounter with the eschatological Lord” (197–198). Cf. the interpretations proposed by Krister Stendahl, *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 215 n. 1, 243 and Franz Mussner, “Ganz Israel wird gerettet werden (Rm 11:26),” *Kairos* 18 (1976) 241–255, who maintain that Israel will be saved without acceptance of the Messiah (Stendahl) or without conversion to the gospel (Mussner). Also see Mary Ann Getty, “Paul and the Salvation of Israel: A Perspective on Romans 9–11,” *CBQ* 50 (1988) 464, who seems to endorse Stendahl’s view. For a refutation of this view, see Reidar Hvalvik, “A ‘Sonderweg’ for Israel: A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11.25–27,” *JSNT* 38 (1990) 87–107.

⁷ Josh 7:25; 1 Sam 7:5; 25:1; 2 Sam 16:22; 1 Kgs 12:1; 2 Chr 12:1; Dan 9:11; *m. Sanh.* 10:1ff.

Cranfield explains the salvation of “all Israel” in three distinct stages: “first the unbelief of the greater part of Israel . . . then completion of the coming in of the Gentiles, and finally the salvation of ‘all Israel.’”⁸ He notices a reversal of the salvation order as found in Rom 1:16, which states that salvation comes first to the Jew and then to the Gentile. In Romans 11, salvation comes first to the Gentiles, provoking the Jews to jealousy, which ultimately results in their salvation.

There is also debate as to whether the salvation of “all Israel” is synchronic (Jews alive at the end of time) or diachronic (Jews of all times). Most scholars favor the synchronic position. Moo comments, “. . . Paul is probably using the phrase ‘all Israel’ to denote the corporate entity of the nation of Israel as it exists at a particular point in time.”⁹ Others, such as Mussner, Hofius, and Bell, favor the diachronic position.¹⁰

3. *The elect of ethnic Israel throughout history.* The third interpretation is often included in surveys but is usually simply dismissed rather than refuted. Although not many scholars hold to this view, there continue to be a few who embrace it.¹¹ This interpretation maintains that God will always save a remnant of Jews throughout history. Israel will experience only a partial hardening until the end of time (i.e. until the fullness of the Gentiles come in).

III. REASONS WHY “ALL ISRAEL” REFERS TO ELECT JEWS THROUGHOUT HISTORY

1. *The context of Romans 9–11.* All acknowledge that Romans 9–11 forms a unit in Paul’s thought. Therefore, any interpretation of Romans 11 must also be consistent with Romans 9 and 10. In chapter 9, Paul demonstrates how God is indeed faithful to his promises although most of Israel has rejected the Messiah. Paul states in 9:6, “For they are not all Israel who are of Israel.” God’s promise to Abraham never included the promise that

⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *Romans*, vol. 2 (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1979) 572.

⁹ Moo, *Romans* 723.

¹⁰ Mussner, “Ganz Israel” 241–245; Hofius, “All Israel” 35; Bell, *Jealousy* 141, 144.

¹¹ Those who hold this view include S. Volbeda, H. Bavinck, R. Lenski, L. Berkhof, H. Hoeksema, O. P. Robertson, H. Ridderbos, W. Hendriksen, A. Hoekema, and C. Horne. S. Volbeda received a doctor of theology degree from the Free University of Amsterdam for his dissertation which defended the meaning of “all Israel” to be the total elect out of Israel (William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul’s Letter to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981] 381). H. Bavinck states: “All Israel (pas Israel) in 11:26 is not, therefore, the people of Israel that at the end of time will be converted in mass. Nor is it the church of the Jews and the Gentiles together. But it is the pleroma that in the course of centuries will be brought in from Israel (Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things* [trans. John Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996] 106. L. Berkhof writes, “All Israel’ is to be understood as a designation not of the whole nation but of the whole number of the elect out of the ancient covenant people” (Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 699). H. Ridderbos states, “That he [Paul] would thereby have in mind a conversion of Israel at one point in the eschatological end time does not appear from Romans 11” (Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* [trans. John R. De Witt; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 358).

his descendants would be saved based on their ethnic identity. True Israel consists of those who are the children of promise, rather than children of the flesh. God never promised that every individual Jew would be saved, but only those he unconditionally elected within Israel. Paul then presents two examples of God's sovereign discrimination within Israel. In Isaac, not in Ishmael, Abraham's descendents were named (9:7); and it was Jacob, not Esau, who was chosen to perpetuate the covenant lineage and in whom the covenant promises were to be fulfilled (9:9–10). Therefore, Paul refutes the notion that God's Word has failed by pointing out that God's promises apply to the spiritual offspring within ethnic Israel.¹² Bavinck rightly concludes,

It is a priori very unlikely that Paul later reconsidered this reasoning, supplementing and improving it in the sense that the promises of God are not fully realized in the salvation of spiritual Israel but will be fully realized only when in the last days a national conversion of Israel takes place.¹³

Furthermore, in 10:12 Paul writes, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him." Paul is stating that as far as obtaining salvation is concerned, there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile. If God has a separate plan for saving Israel in the future, this view would seem to go contrary to Paul's statement in verse 12. Nowhere in chapters 9 or 10 do we anticipate Paul speaking of a mass end-time conversion of Jews. Charles Horne states the dilemma for those claiming a special future for Israel.

If Paul is speaking in 11:26 of a future mass conversion of the nation of Israel, then he is destroying the entire development of his argument in chaps. 9–11. For the one important point that he is trying to establish constantly is exactly this: that God's promises attain fulfillment not in the nation as such (that is, all of ethnic Israel) but rather in the remnant according to the election of grace.¹⁴

Wright addresses the same dilemma:

The problem about the content of Romans 9–11 then becomes one of *integration*. Put simply, the issue is this: if Paul rejects the possibility of a status of special privilege for Jews in chs. 9 and 10, how does he manage, apparently, to reinstate such a position in ch. 11? It is this apparent inconsistency that has led many to suggest that the section contains a fundamental self-contradiction, which is then explained either as a resurgence of patriotic sentiment (Dodd) or the vagaries of apocalyptic fantasy (Bultmann).¹⁵

¹² I agree with Hafemann that Rom 9:6 governs the theme of Romans 9–11. Hafemann writes, "the main of Romans 9–11 . . . is not the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, the nature of Paul's mission in the plan of God, the future of Israel, the scheme of salvation history, the identity of true Israel, nor even the nature of God's election or predestination, *per se*. These are all penultimate concerns. The central issue in Romans 9–11 is whether God's faithfulness to himself and to his promised redemptive, saving activity can be maintained in spite of Israel's rejection of Jesus" (Scott Hafemann, "The Salvation of Israel in Romans 11:25–32: A Response to Krister Stendahl," *Ex Auditu* 4 [1988] 43). I disagree, however, with Hafemann's view that Paul's full answer to 9:6 does not come until Rom 11:26.

¹³ Bavinck, *Last Things* 105.

¹⁴ Charles Horne, "The Meaning of the Phrase 'And Thus All Israel Will Be Saved' (Romans 11:26)," *JETS* 21 (1978) 333.

¹⁵ Wright, *Climax* 236.

2. *The nature of the question (vv. 1, 11).* In 11:1, Paul asks the question, “Has God cast off his people?” The question is *not*, “Has God cast off ethnic Israel with respect to his special plan for their future?” It seems, however, that this question is often subconsciously read that way. To ask the question in that manner misses Paul’s real question and prejudices one towards interpreting the rest of the chapter as advocating a special future for Israel. The nature of the question, however, does not anticipate a future mass conversion. The question Paul asks is, “Has God cut off ethnic Israel *altogether*?” or, “Is there any hope for the continuation of a saving activity of God among Israelites?”¹⁶

O. Palmer Robertson explains:

Ethnic Israel had rejected their Messiah. They had crucified the Christ. Would it not therefore be quite logical to conclude that God would reject ethnic Israel? If a Gentile rejects Christ, he is lost. Israel rejected the Christ nationally. Should they not be lost nationally? Why should God continue to act savingly within Israel? They received all the special favor of the Lord (9:4, 5), and yet rejected the Lord’s Christ. Why should they not be cast off completely?¹⁷

The same could be said of the question in verse 11 where Paul asks, “have they stumbled that they should fall?” Again, Paul is not asking if there is going to be a future mass conversion of Israel. Rather, he is asking if Israel has completely forfeited their past privilege. James Dunn uses a running metaphor to describe Israel’s predicament: “their stumble is not so serious as it at first sounds. It is not a complete fall, as, for example, the sprawling on one’s face which puts a runner completely out of the race.”¹⁸

3. *The emphasis on the present situation of ethnic Israel (vv. 1, 5, 13–14, 30–31).* Upon reading through Romans 11 it becomes evident that the present, not the future, is the focus of Paul’s thought.¹⁹ In answer to the question raised in verse 1, Paul offers himself as proof that God has not cast off his people. He argues, “For I am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.” William Hendriksen paraphrases Paul’s question and answer this way: “Does anyone need proof that God fulfills his promise and has not rejected Israel? Well, then look at me. God did not reject me, and I am an Israelite.”²⁰ Paul’s immediate answer to the question he raised in verse 1 involves the present, not the future.

Verse 5 gives further evidence that the present is at the forefront of Paul’s reasoning. He states, “Even so then, at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.” Paul specifically emphasizes

¹⁶ O. Palmer Robertson, “Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?” in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology: Papers from the Thirtieth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society* (ed. Kenneth Kantzer and Stanley Gundry; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979) 213.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ James Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 522–523.

¹⁹ Cf. Hafemann, “Response” 49–50, 53.

²⁰ Hendriksen, *Romans* 361. Cranfield argues that Paul’s argument is more than he, a Jew, is part of the saved remnant but that he as a Jew is God’s apostle to the Gentiles. He writes, “God would hardly have chosen a Jew to be His special apostle to the Gentiles, had He cast off His people, the Jews” (Cranfield, *Romans* 543).

the present situation of Israel by using the phrase “at this present time” (ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ). In the preceding verses Paul illustrates his point with the example of Elijah. Just as in Elijah’s day there was a remnant, so now there is a remnant within Israel. God did not reject his people during the days of Elijah and has not done so now.²¹ Horne contends that the import of Paul’s argument in using the situation in Elijah’s day “is simply that the salvation of a small remnant from the total mass is ample proof that God’s true people have not been, are not now, nor will be cast off.”²²

Furthermore, verses 13 and 14 support our conclusion. Paul states: “For I speak to you Gentiles; inasmuch as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if by any means I may provoke those who are my flesh and save some of them.” Does Paul’s hope of provoking the Jews to jealousy imply a future mass conversion? The answer to this question must be “no” since Paul uses his own ministry as the means of provocation. That is, Paul’s hope for the salvation of “some of them” comes through his own ministry. G. C. Berkouwer notes this emphasis:

From our perspective, centuries after Paul, there is a danger of looking at his concern for Israel as the unveiling of a chiliastic secret, and seeing it as some kind of apocalyptic schema or narrative. Such an interpretation raises a peculiar dilemma; either the last generation (as “all Israel”) shall return or Paul was mistaken. This position, however, ignores the extent to which Paul, convinced by the evidence of salvation among the Gentiles, concentrated his attention on the *maximum* possibilities in *his own time*. . . . This expectation is not that of apocalyptic, but something that generates tremendous apostolic activity.²³

The principle that a “remnant” will remain throughout every age is the basis for Paul’s hope that “some” would be saved during his ministry.

Finally, verses 30 and 31 support our thesis that Paul is concerned with the present more than with the future. He writes,

For as you [Gentiles] were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their [Israel’s] disobedience, even so these [Israel] also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you [Gentiles] they [Israel] also may now obtain mercy.

The threefold “now” (νῦν) of these two verses indicates Paul’s emphasis on the present situation of Israel. Although the final “now” is textually debated, most commentators favor its inclusion.²⁴ It is clear that even now Israel is receiving mercy.

²¹ J. Scott states, “Paul’s main point in citing this text is that now as always God has preserved a remnant in Israel” (James Scott, “Restoration of Israel,” in *DPL* [ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993] 803).

²² Horne, “Meaning” 330.

²³ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (trans. James Van Oosterom; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 349.

²⁴ See Bell, *Jealousy* 149 n. 233, where he cites various scholars who include the third νῦν as authentic. The inclusion of the third νῦν is supported by \aleph , B, and D^{*c}.

4. *The nature of the “mystery” (v. 25).* Paul writes in verses 25 and 26a,

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that a hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.

The “mystery” includes a threefold schema: (1) the hardening of part of Israel; (2) the coming in of the fullness of the Gentiles; and (3) the salvation of all Israel.

What does Paul mean when he states that Israel is experiencing a “hardening in part” (πώρωσις ἀπὸ μέρους)? The noun πώρωσις (“hardening”) corresponds to the verb πωρόω (“were hardened”) in verse 7 where Paul contrasts the “elect” with the “rest.”²⁵ As in verse 7, in verse 25 Paul is speaking quantitatively (“in part”) and not temporally (“for a while”). The verse should not be understood as meaning “for a while hardening has happened to Israel” but “a partial hardening (or ‘a hardening in part’) has happened to Israel.”²⁶ Also, by a “hardening in part” Paul does not mean that all of Israel is only partially hardened, but that some are fully hardened while the elect remnant is being saved. In no way does the phrase suggest that God intends to initiate a special salvation era for Israel in the future.

There is also debate as to the meaning of “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.” Those who affirm Paul to be teaching a future mass conversion of Jews naturally read this phrase to mean that Israel will be hardened by God for a while but that will change when the fullness of the Gentiles are saved, after which an unprecedented number of Jews will put their faith in Christ. Moo paraphrases the verse: “Israel’s partial hardening will last only *until* the fullness of the Gentiles comes in—and then it will be removed.”²⁷ But is that the most natural way to read this phrase?

This question can only be answered by examining ἄχρι οὗ (“until”). This phrase is essentially terminative in its significance, implying the end of something. Yet, only the context can determine where the emphasis lies after the termination. Often the phrase is used in an eschatological context, where the termination envisioned contains a finalization aspect that makes questions concerning the reversal of the circumstance irrelevant. In other words, what is important is not what will take place *after* the event is completed, but *that* the event is eschatologically fulfilled.

For example, in 1 Cor 11:26 Paul states that the church is to partake of the Lord’s Supper and in doing so it proclaims the Lord’s death “until” (ἄχρι οὗ) he comes. Paul’s purpose is not to stress that one day the church will not celebrate the Lord’s Supper. Instead his point is that this celebration will continue “until” the end of time. Also, 1 Cor 15:25 states that Christ must reign “until” (ἄχρι οὗ) he has put all enemies under his feet.

²⁵ Ibid. 128.

²⁶ ἀπὸ μέρους is used three times in the quantitative sense (Rom 15:15; 2 Cor 1:14; 2:5) and once in the temporal sense (Rom 15:24); but even the one temporal usage is debated.

²⁷ Moo, *Romans* 717.

The intended stress is not that a time will come when Christ will no longer reign, but that he must continue to reign until the last enemy is conquered at the final judgment.²⁸

Likewise, the hardening of Israel that will occur “until” the fullness of the Gentiles comes refers to an eschatological termination. A hardening will occur throughout the whole of the present age until the return of Christ. Paul is not suggesting a time when the hardening will be reversed but a time when the hardening is eschatologically fulfilled.²⁹

The climax of the mystery is found in verse 26a, “and so all Israel will be saved.” When seeking to interpret this verse, it is important to remember that the question under consideration is whether God has forsaken Israel *altogether* and not whether there is a special future for Israel. The key to understanding the phrase “as so all Israel will be saved” centers on the use of οὕτως. There are at least three possibilities: (1) temporal; (2) logical; and (3) modal. When understood temporally, the phrase reads “and *then* all Israel will be saved.” This reading is how many understand the verse.³⁰ Hardening has happened to part of Israel “until” the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; but *then, after that*, all Israel will be saved. Such a rendering naturally leads one to suppose a special time of grace for ethnic Israel. It must be noted, however, that οὕτως never has temporal significance.³¹ A second possibility is that οὕτως has a logical sense. The verse would then read “and in consequence of this process (v. 25b) all Israel will be saved.” There are a few cases in Paul where οὕτως has a logical sense but most scholars opt for the third usage.³²

Taking οὕτως modally (“and in this manner all Israel will be saved”), however, does settle this interpretative debate. Moo (rightly) argues that the “manner” comes from verses 11–24, which is then summed up in verse 25.³³ His interpretation of these earlier verses, however, leads him to the wrong conclusion. He states: “God imposes a hardening on most of Israel while Gentiles come into the messianic salvation, with the Gentiles’ salvation leading in turn to Israel’s jealousy and her own salvation. But this means that *houtos*, while not having a temporal *meaning*, has a temporal *reference*.”³⁴

But in its context does οὕτως have a temporal reference? Is Paul looking prospectively into the future beyond the fullness of the Gentiles or is he look-

²⁸ Also see Luke 21:44; Acts 7:18; 27:33; Gal 3:19; Heb 3:13; and Rev 2:25, where ἄχρι οὗ is used and Matt 24:38; Acts 22:4; and Heb 4:12, where only ἄχρι is used.

²⁹ Robertson, “Future” 220, comments, “the phrase implies not a new beginning after a termination point in time, but instead the continuation of a prevailing circumstance for Israel until the end of time.”

³⁰ The New English Bible apparently follows this popular but unsupported rendering by translating it, “when that has happened, all Israel will be saved.”

³¹ BAGD does not cite one possible use of οὕτως with a temporal significance.

³² Moo, *Romans* 720, lists Rom 1:15; 6:11; 1 Cor 14:25; 1 Thess 4:17; Hofius, “All Israel” 35, only cites 1 Cor 11:28; 1 Thess 4:17.

³³ It is possible that the manner is found in what follows but that is not likely in combination with καθὼς γέγραπται.

³⁴ Moo, *Romans* 720; also see Cranfield, *Romans* 576; Bell, *Jealousy* 136.

ing retrospectively into the past? In the context of Romans 11, Robertson rightly explains that it is the latter.

First the promises as well as the Messiah were given to Israel. Then, somehow in God's mysterious plan, Israel rejected its Messiah and was cut off from its position of distinctive privilege. As a result, the coming of Israel's Messiah was announced to the Gentiles. The nations then obtained by faith what Israel could not find by seeking in the strength of their own flesh. Frustrated over seeing the blessings of their messianic kingdom heaped on the Gentiles, Israel is moved to jealousy. Consequently they too repent, believe, and share in the promises originally made to them. "And in this manner" (καὶ οὕτως), by such a fantastic process which shall continue throughout the entire present age "up to" (ἄχρις οὗ) the point that the full number of Gentiles is brought in, all Israel shall be saved.³⁵

Following the above interpretation, it is natural to take "all Israel" as referring to the elect of ethnic Israel throughout history. Furthermore, since we have determined that Paul does not have in mind a special future for Israel it does not seem likely that he is referring to the salvation of the nation of Israel at a future time. Horne comments: ". . . when Paul states that 'all Israel shall be saved' he means to refer to the full number of elect Jews whom it pleases God to bring into his kingdom throughout the ages until the very day when the full number of Gentiles also shall have been brought in."³⁶ Likewise Hendriksen writes:

It is evident . . . that the salvation of "all Israel" was being progressively realized in Paul's own day and age, and that it will continue to be progressively realized until "all Israel" shall have been saved. When the full number of elect Gentiles will have been gathered in, then the full number of elect Jews will also have been gathered in. . . . In Elijah's day there was a remnant. In Paul's day there was a remnant. In the years to come there would be a remnant. These remnants of all the ages taken together constitute "all Israel."³⁷

Furthermore, if "all" meant a great number of Jews at the end of time, does that interpretation do justice to the meaning of all? It would in fact only include a small fraction of Jews which is not as climactic as it might first appear.³⁸ In addition, one must wonder if a future mass conversion of Israel fits Paul's theology revealed elsewhere. In 1 Thess 2:14b–16 we read,

For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets, and

³⁵ Robertson, "Future" 222.

³⁶ Horne, "Meaning" 334.

³⁷ William Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 48–51.

³⁸ Robertson argues that if one takes "all Israel" to refer to the nation of Israel, it must further refer to every individual and not merely a majority of the nation. He states that "the hardening in this context refers to the historical outworking of the principle of reprobation." He goes on to say, "if a day is coming in which the principle of reprobation is to be inactive among Israel, then it must be assumed that every single Israelite living at the time will be saved. If even one Israelite of that period is to be lost, then the principle of 'hardening' or 'reprobation' still would be active" (Robertson, "Future" 223).

have persecuted us; and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the end.

Paul states that the wrath of God will come upon the Jews until the end (εἰς τέλος). It seems clear from this text that Paul does not imagine a time when this judgment will be reversed with a special dispensation for the nation of Israel.³⁹

IV. ANSWERS TO POSSIBLE OBJECTIONS

1. *Verses 12 and 15 suggest a future mass conversion of Israel.* In verse 12 Paul declares, “Now if their [Israel’s] trespass is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!” Verse 15 parallels verse 12, “For if their [Israel’s] being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?” Those who interpret Rom 11:26a as referring to a future mass conversion of Israel state that Israel’s “trespass,” “failure,” and “being cast away” refer to the present time, whereas their “fullness” and “acceptance” refer to a time yet to come. Currently, Israel is rejecting Christ, but the time will come when they accept Christ and will be saved. Therefore, the “fullness” and “acceptance” of Israel refers to a time, after the present age of gospel proclamation, when Israel again turns to God.

The above interpretation is not without its difficulties. For example, is there any evidence in the text that “fullness” (v. 12) must refer to a future event when Israel returns to their God? One clue to the meaning of “fullness” (πλήρωμα) is found in verse 25 where Paul speaks of the “fullness” of the Gentiles. Since virtually every scholar interprets “the fullness of the Gentiles” as referring to the full number of elect Gentiles throughout history,⁴⁰ is it not also likely that the “fullness” of Israel refers to the full number of elect Jews throughout history? Since verses 12 and 15 are parallel, the “acceptance” of verse 15 also refers to the consummation of all elect Jews. Paul, of course, makes an argument from the lesser to the greater. If the failure of Jews meant the gospel blessings for the Gentiles, then their acceptance, that is, the coming in of the full number of the elect, will mean nothing less than the resurrection itself (“life from the dead”). Therefore, the “fullness” refers to the full number of the elect Israelites, not just the salvation of the remnant at any one time.⁴¹

³⁹ I disagree with George Okeke, who claims that Paul’s statements in 1 Thess 2:13–16 cannot be reconciled with Romans 11. He states, “It is . . . an unacceptable exegesis to harmonize the Thessalonian passage to fit into the theological framework of Romans 9–11” (George Okeke, “1 Thessalonians 2:13–16: The Fate of the Unbelieving Jews,” *NTS* 27 [1980] 136).

⁴⁰ For example, see Cranfield, *Romans* 575; Moo, *Romans* 719.

⁴¹ Robertson, “Future” 216, comments, “the ‘receiving’ of the ‘full number’ in Israel will be realized in no way other than the way in which Israelites currently are being ‘received’ and added to the number.”

2. *Verses 23 and 24 imply that Israel as a nation will again be grafted in.* Paul states in 11:23–24,

And they [Israel] also, if they do not continue in unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. For if you were cut out of the olive tree which is wild by nature, and were grafted contrary to nature into a good olive tree, how much more will these, who are the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree?

Those who affirm a special future for Israel claim that Paul teaches that Israel as a nation will be grafted into the tree of salvation. There are at least two difficulties with such an interpretation. First, it should be noted that Paul's primary purpose for using this metaphor is to warn the Gentiles of pride; they are not the natural branches. In other words, this metaphor was not given to demonstrate that in the future Israel would be grafted back into the olive tree. Second, nowhere does Paul state or imply that God is going to graft *all* unbelieving Jews back into the tree. Rather, he states that those who believe will be grafted into the olive tree and are even now being grafted in. Robertson notes, "this participation by being 'grafted in' cannot be postponed to some future date, while each and every Gentile believer immediately experiences the blessings of the covenant. Equally with every (current) Gentile believer, so every (current) Jewish believer shall be grafted in."⁴²

3. *The "mystery" is no longer a mystery (v. 25).* For Paul, "mystery" (μυστήριον) is not something which remains concealed but something which was hidden and now is revealed. In Rom 16:25–26 Paul declares, "Now to him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery (μυστήριον) which was kept secret since the world began but now has been made manifest."⁴³ Those who reject the position that "all Israel" in verse 26 refers to the elect Jews throughout history often state that the mystery, which Paul speaks of is no longer a mystery if Paul is only declaring that all the elect Jews will be saved. John Murray raises this objection: "that all the elect will be saved does not have the particularity that 'mystery' in this instance involves."⁴⁴ Michael Vanlaningham makes a similar comment: "If 'all Israel' is simply the elect from ethnic Israel who are saved along with the Gentiles throughout the age, special revelation to Paul in the form of a *mysterion* (v. 25) is pointless."⁴⁵

Paul, however, is not simply asserting *that* all elect Israel will be saved, but he is speaking of the *manner* ("and in this manner") in which their salvation will be accomplished. What then is the nature of this mystery? It likely involves the interdependence of the salvation of the Gentiles and Israel. Ridderbos explains: "The mystery (v. 25) is thus situated in the

⁴² Ibid. 211.

⁴³ Also see Eph 3:4–6 and Col 1:26.

⁴⁴ John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 2:97.

⁴⁵ Michael Vanlaningham, "Romans 11:25–27 and the Future of Israel in Paul's Thought," *The Master's Seminary Journal* 3 (1992) 160; also see Cranfield, *Romans* 576.

manner in which this fullness of Israel is to be saved: in the strange interdependence of the salvation of Israel and that of the gentiles. . . . God grants no mercy to Israel without the gentiles, but neither does he do so to the gentiles without Israel.”⁴⁶

4. *The reference to Israel in verse 25 cannot be different than that of verse 26.* The final objection that we will consider is the probability of Paul using the term “Israel” having two different referents in the space of 2 verses. Paul’s first reference to Israel in verse 25 (“a hardening in part has happened to Israel”) clearly refers to the entire Jewish nation. By stating that only part of Israel is hardened, he is also including those who are not hardened (i.e. the remnant or the elect). In the next sentence Paul states that “all Israel will be saved.” Is it likely that “Israel” now refers only to the elect of Israel?⁴⁷

It is clear that the reference to “Israel” in verse 25 must refer to ethnic Israel and not a spiritual Israel consisting of both Jews and Gentiles since that is contrary to Paul’s usage of the term in Romans 9–11.⁴⁸ We see no reason, however, 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. For example, in Rom 9:6 Paul states, “they are not all Israel [the nation] who are of Israel [the elect].” That is, not all who are from the nation of Israel are part of the elect remnant of Israel. In the same sentence Paul uses Israel to refer to both the nation and then the elect within the nation. We submit that this is precisely the pattern that Paul uses in 11:25–26.⁴⁹ Furthermore, there is a similar pattern in chapter 11 itself. In verse 7 Paul declares, “What then? Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were hardened.” Within Israel Paul describes two groups: the “elect” and the “rest.” There is the Israel who is “currently missing out and the Israel which is already experiencing the eschatological grace in Christ through faith.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Ridderbos, *Outline* 359–360; also see Hendriksen, *Romans* 378.

⁴⁷ Even though Moo affirms that both references to Israel are the same, he does later add a caveat: “We must note, however, that the interpretation that takes the phrase to refer to the elect among Israel throughout time deserves consideration as a serious alternative” (*Romans* 723).

⁴⁸ 9:4, 6, 27, 31; 10:19, 21; 11:1, 2, 7, 25. Also, in verse 28 Paul adds that Israel is “beloved for the sake of their forefathers.” Furthermore, “for Paul in this context to call the church the ‘Israel’ of God would be to fuel the fire of the Gentiles’ arrogance by giving them grounds to brag that ‘we are the true Israel’” (Moo, *Romans* 721). Because of this evidence Hvalvik, “Sonderweg” 100, notes, “As to the meaning of ‘all Israel,’ there is today almost general agreement that ‘Israel’ here refers to the Jewish people.”

⁴⁹ Wright agrees: “It is impermissible to argue that ‘Israel’ cannot change its referent within the space of two verses, so that ‘Israel’ in v. 25 must mean the same as ‘Israel’ in v. 26: Paul actually began the whole section (9.6) with just a programmatic distinction of two ‘Israels’, and throughout the letter (e.g. 2.25–9) as well as elsewhere (e.g. Philippians 3.2–11) he has systematically transferred the privileges and attributes of ‘Israel’ to the Messiah and his people” (Wright, *Climax* 250).

⁵⁰ Dunn, *Theology* 522.

V. CONCLUSION

Based on the above considerations, I submit that 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.