

Faith Pulpit

A Future for Israel in Romans 9-11

James Montgomery Boice relayed the account of Frederick the Great, king of Prussia, conversing with his chaplain concerning the reliability of the Scriptures.¹ “If your Bible is really from God,” insisted the monarch, “you should be able to demonstrate the fact simply. Give me proof for the inspiration of the Bible in a word.” The undaunted chaplain responded, “Your Majesty, it is possible for me to answer your request literally. I can give you the proof you ask for in one word.” King Frederick was taken aback and demanded, “What is this magic word that carries such a weight of proof?” His chaplain succinctly replied, “Israel.”

In his comments on Romans 11:26-27, Boice underscored the “striking phenomenon” of the continued existence of Israel: “Dispossessed of her homeland and dispersed throughout the world, Israel has nevertheless survived while other peoples in similar situations have not.” Boice further affirmed that God “has a plan for the Jewish people that will unfold in the last days.” As Senior Minister of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Boice’s comments challenged some historic interpretations from the Reformation era.

Overview of Historical Interpretations

The 2003 *Reformation Study Bible* refers to “all Israel” in Romans 11:26 as “A critical expression at this point in Paul’s argument, and one whose meaning is much debated.”² The study Bible provides three possible interpretations of “all Israel”: (1) “It could mean ‘all (spiritual) Israel,’ that is, all elect persons both Jew and Gentile.”³ (2) Alternatively, it could mean “all the elect of Israel,” that is “all Jews destined to be saved throughout history.” (3) Or, “it may point to a time of mass conversion among Jewish people,” that is, a future and general salvation of national Israel. One could summarize these three options for “all Israel” as (1) “all the elect whether Jews or Gentiles,” (2) “the elect Jews throughout history,” or (3) “the eschatological Jewish people [those in the end times] as a nation.”

Martin Luther wavered in his interpretation of this text. In his *Lectures on Romans* (1515-1516), he seemed to support option (3), “the eschatological Jewish people as a nation.” He noted, “The Jews who are now fallen will return and be saved ... Christ, therefore, has not yet come to the Jews, but he will come to them, namely, in the Last Day.”⁴ Yet, later in his career, Luther moved toward alternative (1), “all the elect whether Jews or Gentiles.”⁵ John Calvin’s *Commentary on Romans* definitely favored this first option of “all the people of God.”⁶ The Genevan reformer described this corporate body of all the elect as “the Israel of God” or “the Church, gathered alike from Jews and Gentiles.” He reasoned, “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.”

Nevertheless, Charles Hodge (the nineteenth-century Presbyterian theologian from Princeton) insisted that “Israel, here, from the context, must mean the Jewish people, and *all Israel*, the whole nation ... as a people, they are to be restored.”⁷ As noted in the introduction, James Montgomery Boice’s four-volume commentary on Romans firmly sided with alternative (3), an eschatological salvation of the Jewish nation. Douglas Moo (a biblical scholar whose academic work has focused on Romans) has also favored the eschatological salvation of national Israel. In an extended discussion on “The Future of Israel,” he has maintained that both the immediate context of Romans 11:26 and the broader context of Romans 9-11 point to “the conversion of a significant number of Jews at the time of Christ’s return in glory.”⁸

Immediate Context

In the immediate context, the previous verse declares, “For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” One notes that “Israel” in verse 25 is contrasted with “the Gentiles,” and that “blindness in part” has overtaken this “Israel.” Our focused text of verse 26 then follows in quick succession: “And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.” In this close sequence, the temporarily blinded “Israel” of verse 25 becomes the delivered “Israel” of verse 26. This unfolding progression of events is directly called a “mystery,” which can be defined as “a purpose of God that previously has not been revealed” (cf. Rom. 16:25-27; 1 Cor. 2:7-8; Eph. 3:1-12; Col. 1:24-27).⁹

Moreover, “Israel” in verse 26 is associated with “Zion” (Jerusalem) and with the household of “Jacob” (a name applied corporately to the Jews in the Hebrew Scriptures). The combination of these three specific terms alludes to Psalm 14:7: “Oh that the salvation of Israel were come out of Zion! when the Lord bringeth back the captivity of his people, Jacob shall rejoice, and Israel shall be glad.” The same vocabulary also echoes the prophecy of Isaiah 59:20: “And the Redeemer shall come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob, saith the Lord.” The very next verse in

Isaiah references “my covenant with them” (Isa. 59:21). A similar sentiment is expressed in the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-32: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.”

Furthermore, Jeremiah 31 expands its explanation, “But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. ... for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:33-34). According to this prophecy of Jeremiah, God would make a “new covenant” with “the house of Israel” because “they shall all know me,” and he would “remember their sin no more” (cf. Ezek. 20:37-40; 36:25-29; 37:23-2). Romans 11:26-27 echoes this material, “And so all Israel shall be saved. ... For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.” Moreover, the Apostle Paul solemnly affirms that this will happen, because “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Rom. 11:29).

Broader Context

The “eschatological Jewish people as a nation” interpretation of Romans 11:26 also fits the broader context of Romans 9-11. At the commencement of chapter 11, Paul states that the prophet Elijah pleaded with God “against Israel” (Rom. 11:2). This statement comes on the immediate heels of the apostle’s self-identification in v. 1: “For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin.” Traversing backward across the bridge between chapters 10 and 11, one comes upon a citation of the divine message spoken through Isaiah: “But to Israel he saith, All day long I have stretched forth my hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people” (Rom. 10:21). In Paul’s own day, this “Israel” remained in unbelief. Therefore, the apostle acknowledged: “Brethren, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved” (Rom. 10:1).

This apostolic desire for the salvation of Israel already surfaces in chapter 9, where Paul discussed those “Who are Israelites” (Rom. 9:4). He expounds, “For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:3). Paul insists that “the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises” were given to these “Israelites” who were “brethren” and “kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom. 9:4). Israel’s reception of “the covenants” here in Romans 9:4 thus bookends with the mention of “all Israel” in Romans 11:26-27 and its predictive reference to “my covenant ... when I shall take away their sins.” Meanwhile, however, this Israel “according to the flesh” remains blinded by obstinate unbelief and stands mired in unforgiven sin, until “the times of the Gentiles” be completed (Rom. 11:25; Luke 21:24-28).

Even so, has God cast aside his people Israel fully and forever? Paul responds with a thunderous “no.” He maintains that God’s placing Israel aside is (1) not total but is (2) temporary and (3) purposeful. First, God has preserved a faithful Jewish “remnant” from “the number of the children of Israel,” so that his casting aside is not total (Rom. 9:27). “Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace” (Rom. 11:5). Second, the divine casting aside is only temporary, “until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” (Rom. 11:25). Third, God is using Jewish unbelief for his own sovereign purposes. The current “fall” of the Jewish people has become “the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles” (Rom. 11:12). But this salvation of the Gentiles is also meant “to provoke” the Jews themselves “to jealousy” (Rom. 11:11). Ultimately, God is “able to graft them in again,” and he will do so in the future (Rom. 11:26).¹⁰

Conclusion

In sum, the eschatological [end times] salvation of the future nation of Israel is founded upon the unchanging character of God himself. The Apostle Paul aptly concluded Romans 11 by breaking forth in ardent praise: “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.” Divine wisdom engenders worship, as the seeds of doctrine blossom forth into doxology. By divine grace, Israel awaits a glorious future, and all the glory belongs to God alone. *Soli Deo gloria!*

This article first appeared in Frontline magazine, 2024. Used with Permission.

Works Cited

1. James Montgomery Boice, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), vol. 3, 1375-1376.
2. R. C. Sproul (ed.), *The Reformation Study Bible* (Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, 2005), 1633.
3. Of course, in the full Reformed system, this “spiritual Israel” is “taken as basically synonymous with the church” (Sproul, *Reformation Study Bible*, 1633).
4. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Romans* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), 316.
5. See Martin Luther, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 146.
6. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 436-437.
7. Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (London: Banner of Truth, 1972), 374; italics original.
8. Douglas J. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans: A Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 163-172.
9. Moo, *Encountering the Book of Romans*, 170.
10. This present article addresses neither the full unfolding of eschatological events nor differing views concerning “new covenant” blessings and present-day believers, both of which would require systematizing materials far beyond Romans 9-11.

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