

And So all Israel will be Saved

by James R. Hughes—Revised: 1998/07

Introduction

The question that I will address in this essay is: Does Romans 11 teach that there will be a mass conversion of the Jews before the return of Christ?

Before I attempt to answer this question I wish first to state my presuppositions and second to state why I believe that answering this question correctly is important or why it matters what is our interpretation of this passage.

Every interpreter of Romans 11 comes at this passage with his own set of presuppositions. It is impossible for us to provide an interpretation of this passage without a context in which we interpret it. I believe that one of the reasons that there have been many difficulties interpreting Romans 11 (v 26) is that we don't deal first with root presuppositions, but rather we assume that we can provide an interpretation of this passage in the abstract. But the interpretation of this passage will be quite different depending on the presuppositions of the interpreters.

Therefore you should know my presuppositions before we look at Romans 11. Then you will be able to see how my interpretation is logically consistent within the context of my presuppositions. If you disagree with my interpretation, I ask you first to deal with the presuppositions and demonstrate from Scripture that they are wrong; for they colour my interpretation just as your presuppositions colour your interpretation.

Eschatological Presuppositions

First, here are my eschatological presuppositions:

- Christ will return to this earth (1 Thes 4.15, 16) in same way as he was taken from the earth (Acts 1.11).
- His return will be without warning, sudden, and generally unexpected—there will be no special signs or evidences to indicate when he will return (Matt 24.36-44; 25.1-13; 1 Thes 5.1-3; 2 Pet 3.10).
- The period of 1,000 years referred to in Revelation 20 is a symbol for the complete period of the *last days* (Acts 2.17; Heb 1.2; 1 Jn 2.18)—the period between Christ's first coming and his second coming. This is not a present period of a literal 1,000 years, nor is it a period of a literal 1,000 years yet to come, when Christ will rule in a special way — either before his physical return or after his physical return.
- The Church will grow and increase in number and fill the whole earth, by being present in every nation, throughout the period of the *last days*. From a small seed like that of a mustard seed, the Church will grow into a great tree (Mt 13.31-32). From a small lump of yeast the Church will grow to fill the entire dough of the earth (Mt 13.33). People out of all nations will come to Christ (Mt 28.19; Rev 7.9). In absolute numbers and in relative numbers, the Church will grow into a vast multitude (Rev 7.9) throughout the period of the *last days*.
- Although the general trend for the Church will be one of growth, there will be periods of great decline in society and the Church (1 Tim 4.1; 2 Tim 3.1-5; 2 Pet 3.3-4; 1 Jn 2.18, 4.3; Jude 18).
- There will be a final time of falling away before Christ returns (Lk 18.8; 2 Thes 2.3, 7, 8¹). But we will not be able to determine if any specific period of falling away is the final one before the return of Christ, since this will be one of many.
- Christ's return could happen at any time. Every generation is to be expecting his return (Rom 13.11-12; Heb 10.37; 2 Pet 3.8-10).

¹ Notice 2 Thes 2.1 uses the expression "being gathered to him" (compare with 1 Thes 4.17). This passage is speaking of the time of Christ's return.

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- When Christ returns the dead will be raised from the graves (1 Cor 15.20-23; 1 Thes 4.15-17), and then there will be a general judgement (Mt 13.49, 50; 16.27; 25.14-46; Lk 19.15-27; Jn 5.28, 29; 1 Cor 4.5; 2 Thes 1.6-10; Jude 14, 15; Rev 20.11-15).
- At the time of the general judgement the heavens and the earth will be consumed with fire (2 Pet 3.10-12), all creation will be restored (Rom 8.19-22), the New Heavens and New Earth will be established (Is 65.17-25; 2 Pet 3.13; Rev 21.1), and Heaven will be extended to Earth (Rev 21.2-4).

The Jews (as a Nation) Have Been Replaced by the Church

Another of my presuppositions is that since the introduction of the NT economy, God no longer deals with the Jews as a special nation. Since this belief is key to the interpretation of Romans 11, I will provide narrative evidence to support it, rather than just provide 'proof texts' as I did above.

Jesus and Paul teach that the Jews (as a nation) had their chance to receive Jesus as the Messiah while he was on earth. If they rejected him they would no longer be considered the people of God, would be cut off, and would be treated as pagans. For example:

- Jesus says: "I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."² (Mt 8.11,12)
- In the *Parable of Two Sons* and *Parable of the Tenants* (Mt 21.28-46), Jesus says: "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit." (v 43)
- The *Parable of Fig Tree* (Lk 13.6-9) says: "cut it down." (v 9)
- Jesus cursed the fig tree (Mt 21.18-22), speaking of the Jews (see Hos 9.10), and said "May you never bear fruit again!" (v 19)
- In the *Seven Woes* of Matthew 23, Jesus appeals to Jerusalem to believe and then says: "your house is left to you desolate." (v 38)
- In 1 Thessalonians (2.14-16) Paul indicates that the Jewish generation which rejected the Messiah was the last generation of Jews. Because of their rejection of the Messiah, "[t]he wrath of God has come upon them at last [or fully]."
- When Paul was in Corinth the Jews "opposed him and became abusive" and after shaking his clothes in protest he said "Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles." (Acts 18.6; see also Acts 28.25-28)

Jesus makes it clear that the time of his preaching is the Jews' hour. This indicates, that if they rejected him, which they did (see Jn 1.11), he would reject them as a nation. Paul also indicates that the Jews, as a nation, had their chance.

The destruction of Jerusalem (in 70 A.D.) is a clear sign that God has stopped dealing with the Jews as a nation. This of course does not mean that individual Jews cannot come to Christ just as any other sinner can turn to him for salvation (e.g., Mt 23.39; 2 Cor 3.14-16; Eph 2.11-18).

Jesus is the fulfillment and completion of everything that was true Israel. He represents Israel by doing everything that Israel was supposed to do. He is everything that Israel was supposed to be. He is the final and

² Scripture quotations taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 International Bible Society.

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only absolutely true representative of Israel. Jesus is the final Israelite – true Israel – in the following ways. He is the:

- Fulfillment of the promise of blessing for the nations (Is 9.1, 2; Mt 4.15-16).
- One called out of Egypt (Hosea 11.1; Mt 2.14, 15).
- Faithful one, who persevered in the temptation in the wilderness (Acts 7.36-42 compared with Mt 4.1-11).
- True servant of God (Mt 3.17; 17.5 echo Is 42.1).
- True son of David (2 Sam 7.8-16; Mt 1.17; Acts 15.13-18).
- Place of atonement and the place of God's presence – the tabernacle (Jn 1.14) and temple (Mt 12.6; Jn 2.19-21; Eph 2.20-22) erected by God himself and not by human hands (Acts 7.48).
- Sacrifice (Heb 10.12) and the altar (Heb 13.10).
- Lawgiver (Mt 5-7), superior to Moses (Heb 3.1-6).
- Fulfillment of the feasts, holy days and institutions (e.g., Sabbath [Jn 5; Mk 2.27]; Passover [Jn 6; 1 Cor 5.7]; Feast of Tabernacles [Jn 7.2-13]; Feast of Dedication [Jn 10.22-39]).
- Fulfillment of the sign of circumcision (Col 2.11, 12).
- Word (written [Rom 3.2] compared with living [Jn 1.1, 14]).
- High Priest (Psm 110.4; Heb 7; 8.1) who replaces the old order.
- Mediator of a better covenant (Heb 8.6; 9.15).
- New Jerusalem (Is 52.1; Phil 3.20; Heb 11.10; 12.22-23; Rev 3.12) represented by his people (Mt 5.14).

Since the promises of God announced in the OT have reached their universal fulfillment in Christ they now encompass believers in all nations. It is a mistake to look for God to continue any of the particular Jewish aspects of the OT or of Israel's nationhood. This does not imply that there is no longer a people, a temple and a land. There is still a flesh-and-blood Israel, but it is made up of spiritual Israel and not a particular group of people identified today as Jews; it is the Church (Eph 2.12; Gal 6.16). There is still a visible temple, but it is no longer found in a single location (Jerusalem); it is the people of God (1 Cor 3.16) from all nations throughout history. There is still a physical land for the people of God; it is the entire earth that the godly will inherit (Mt 5.5) with the new Jerusalem at its centre (Rev 21.2). The Church stands in the place of OT Israel and carries out its mission to the world.

Everything that was specifically Jewish, or part of Israel in the OT, has come to an end in Christ and has been universalized in those who bear his name—Christians. There is nothing left that is distinctively Jewish that originates from God. Those “in Christ” are God's people today and are therefore part of the true Israel. Anyone who claims to be part of Israel (e.g., a Jew today) and rejects Jesus is a pretender and not part of spiritual Israel.

Someone may argue, in response, that the covenants that were made with Israel were eternal covenants and therefore the Jews as a nation can never be rejected because God never breaks his covenants. In response we need to consider the following:

- The Abrahamic Covenant is not a promise for the physical nation of Israel—it is a promise for the spiritual seed of Abraham (Rom 3.29, 30; 4.13-16; Gal 3.7-9).
- Abraham's direct descendants included Ishmaelites (Gen 16.25) and Midianites (Gen 25.2, 4), who were clearly not Jews. Arabs consider themselves to be descendants of Ishmael (and therefore of Abraham) and certainly do not consider themselves to be Jews! It is a mistake to say that the covenant made with Abraham can be the basis for Jewish national continuity in God's household. The Abrahamic Covenant was, and is, a spiritual covenant that applied to those who placed their hope in the coming Messiah, and who now place their hope in the Christ who has come.
- The covenants made with Moses and David ('Jewish' covenants) are bracketed by the Abrahamic Covenant and New Covenant both of which apply to a spiritual people, not to a physical nation. If the various covenants (i.e., Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, New) are forms of the one Covenant of Grace, then the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants are also to be understood ultimately as spiritual, and not national, covenants.
- When God rescued the Jews from Egypt, he made reference to the covenant made with Abraham (Isaac and Jacob) as the ground for their rescue (Ex 2.24, 6.4, 5). Then, when he first applied this covenant to the nation

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under Moses' leadership, he made them a conditional offer: "[I]f you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession." (Ex 19.5) The Jews as a nation were offered the status of being a select and favoured nation only as long as they kept the covenant.

- Notice further, that out of all the nations on earth, they were to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex 19.6) It is interesting that Peter and John apply essentially the same words to the NT Church:
 - "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God." (1 Pet 2.9)
 - "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins [and thus made us a holy nation] by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father..." (Rev 1.5-6)It is evident from these allusions to Exodus, that Peter and John viewed the NT Church as the continuation of the Jewish nation. The NT Church has replaced the Jewish nation as the chosen 'nation'.
- The Jews believed that they were in a special relationship with God because they claimed Abraham as their father (Jn 8.39). Jesus replied that their father was the Devil (Jn 8.44). In perpetual covenant terms, Abraham is the father of the faithful and not the father of a physical seed.
- Stephen refers to the covenant made with Abraham as "the covenant of circumcision" (Acts 7.8). But Paul tells us that circumcision is now no longer an essential part of the Covenant (Rom 2.28, 29; 1 Cor 7.19; Gal 5.6, 6.15). The covenant made with Abraham has not been annulled; but circumcision, the distinctive 'badge' of the Jews (Eph 2.11) in the OT, has been replaced by baptism on in the NT (Acts 2.38; Col 2.11, 12). In the NT economy, Gentiles as well as Jews (Gal 3.28) are among the Israel of God (Gal 6.15-16). To suggest that those marked with circumcision continue to have a special place in God's plans seems to invalidate the importance of changing the sign of the Covenant.
- Israel is God's nation forever, in the same sense that other aspects of the covenant are eternal in Christ. For example, the (Jewish) Sabbath (Ex 31.16-17), bread (Lev 24.8), salt (Num 18.19), the priesthood (Num 25.13), the temple (1 Kings 8.13; 1 Chron 23.25), the sacrificial system (Exd 29.42.), the kingly line (2 Sam 23.5), circumcision (Gen 17.13), and the land (1 Chron 16.16-18) are all aspects of the 'Jewish' covenant which are referred to as everlasting. Yet, in Christ these aspects of the old covenant have been changed or brought to their fulfillment (Heb chapters 4-9). With the coming of Christ, the imperfect types and shadows of the OT economy have been replaced with their spiritual and eternal anti-types. So also, Israel as a nation is the OT counterpart of the Church in the NT. Israel is fulfilled in the Church.

It seems to be clear that the NT Church, called out from many nations and marked by baptism, has replaced the OT Church composed essentially of a single nation, marked with circumcision.

This being the case, we must make sure that we include the teachings of Jesus, Paul, Peter, and John as the context for our interpretation of Romans 11. We should follow a standard principle for Biblical interpretation and consider the weight of the evidence from the rest of the Bible to be normative for guiding the interpretation of the passage under consideration.

The Relevance of a Proper Interpretation

What difference does it make how we interpret Romans 11 (26)? From one perspective, it really does not make much difference. As long as we are saved from sin by Christ we can say, "Let us not debate this issue and leave the matter in Christ's hands." This is what I would like to say. However, the interpretation becomes important if it expects a future general conversion of the Jewish nation because it:

- **Has an impact on the Church's strategies for evangelism**—For example, many Christians seem to think that since God has a special place in his Kingdom for the Jews, then we should invest more energy in their evangelism than we should in the evangelism of other groups (e.g., Muslims).
- **Influences the Church's political views**—For example, there seems to be a prevailing attitude in many parts of the Church that, for some reason, the Jews have a special right to possess the land between the Gaza strip and the

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Jordan, even if it displaces the Palestinians.

- **Provides an unwarranted sign**—If there is going to be a mass conversion of the Jews at some point in the future, then we know that we do not need to be expecting Christ’s return until after this event. Thus there is no need for urgency in our watchfulness as a Church.

It may be the case that people have drawn wrong conclusions from the view which teaches a mass conversion of the Jews. This does not necessarily invalidate that particular interpretation of Romans 11. I give these examples not to prove that Romans 11 teaches something else, but to show why I believe that it is worthwhile for us to spend time coming to a correct understanding of what the passage teaches.

Israel in Context

Paul uses the term *Israel* in the book of Romans to mean at least two things:

- Physical descendants of Jacob
- Spiritual seed of Abraham (believers, the elect)

This is especially apparent from Romans 9.6ff, and especially in 9.6: “For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.” Paul’s use of the expression “Israel of God” in Gal 6.16 to refer to spiritual Israel illustrates the same thing. In this case, spiritual Israel is contrasted with Israel according to the flesh (Gal 6.13, 15).

In a similar way, Jesus shows that “not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.” When he first speaks to Nathaniel he calls him a ‘true Israelite’ (Jn 1.47), implying that others who called themselves Israelites were in fact not. It is clear that Jesus makes the distinction based on the state of a man’s heart, for he says of Nathaniel: “in whom there is nothing false.” The designation ‘true’ does not refer to the fact that Nathaniel was circumcised in the flesh, but to his circumcision in the heart (Jer 4.4).

It is this distinction that Paul refers to when he says: “A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly ... No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit ...” (Rom 2.28, 29)

A key purpose of Romans 9 and 10 is to show that it is not the flesh that is of final importance, but the promise. The Israel of God is not composed of those who are descended from Jacob in the flesh, but is composed of those who are believers through grace.

Romans 11.1-24 as Context

Nevertheless, God still has an elect remnant that will be saved through grace drawn from those who call themselves ‘Jews’. There will always be some among them who will come to faith in Jesus. This is what Paul tells us in Romans 11.1-6 (see also Rom 9.27, 29).

In these verses Paul is talking about a remnant of the physical descendants of Jacob who are chosen by grace (v 5). He indicates that he is among this remnant (v 1). The proof that God has a remnant is found in the salvation of even one Jewish person—Paul himself.

Paul’s rhetorical question in verse 1—“Did God reject his people [the Jews]?—should be understood to have the sense of *total* rejection, and therefore the answer is ‘no’. Paul provides an answer to his own question in verses 1b-6: God did not reject the Jews totally because he has an elect (v 2 uses the word *foreknew*) remnant (v 5) saved by grace (v 6).

Earlier, Paul noted that even though the Jews collectively had rejected the Covenant and the Messiah (Rom 9.30-33; 10.2-3, 16, 21), God has not rejected any who believe as individuals (Rom 10.4, 11-13). He continues this theme in the first part of chapter 11 (vss 2, 4-5).

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It is clear that in verses 1-6 Paul is dealing with a group, called the ‘remnant’, made up of believing individuals in any generation. He is not speaking here about something that will happen to the Jewish nation collectively at some point in the future.

When we come to verses 7-10 we find the same contrast set before us that we find in Romans 9 (v 6). This contrast is between the physical nation and the elect. Out of the physical nation of Israel some (the elect [v 7]) obtained salvation, but the others (the majority) were hardened (v 7) and rejected *forever* (v 10).

To this point in Paul’s thinking we see that there is a portion of the physical descendants of Jacob that is saved and a portion that is not. This is just as it is with the rest of humanity—there is a portion that is elect and a portion that is not.

There is nothing in verses 8-10 which gives even a hint that Paul is changing the discussion to any other groups than the elect remnant *vs* the rejected majority of the Jews. He certainly is not speaking of the majority of some final future generation. In fact, verse 8-10 taken by themselves seem to present a total rejection of the Jews without any hope even for a remnant!

In verse 11 Paul asks a question which parallels his question in verse 1. In verse 1 we need to understand Paul as asking: “Did God reject *all* his people?” or “Did God reject his people *totally*?” So, in verse 11 we are to understand Paul as asking: “did they *all* [i.e., the physical nation of Israel] stumble beyond recovery?” The answer to both questions is the same, “no, there is an elect remnant!”

Some argue that in the first part of chapter 11 Paul shows that the rejection of Israel is not complete but partial, and then he changes his focus (vss 11ff) to show that it is not final but temporary. This view is apparently strengthened by the NIV’s use of the word ‘forever’³ in verse 10, and its translation of verse 15⁴ in the future tense. Whether or not these verses are speaking of a temporary situation, we can see by comparing the two questions and their answers that those who did not “stumble ... beyond recovery” (v 11) are the same people who were **not** rejected (v 1). In verses 5 and 7 those who were not rejected were the elect remnant. Paul’s question in verse 11 is answered by pointing to the same group—the elect remnant.

If verse 11 is speaking of a *temporary* stumbling of Israel, it is temporary because there will be some (the elect) who will be saved. Each time a Jew is saved, the hardening is shown to be temporary. Paul is saying essentially the same thing he says earlier: “there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him.” (Rom 10.12) He is assuring his readers that there is hope for the Jews, everyone among the elect (Jew or Gentile) is temporarily hardened until the Holy Spirit changes his heart.

Notice also that a contrast is set up by Paul in verse 12 between the ‘loss’ and the ‘fullness’. This contrast parallels that set up in verse 7 between ‘Israel’ (the rejected majority) and the ‘elect’. A consistent interpretation of verse 12 with the preceding verses will understand the ‘fullness’ to be the same group mentioned in verse 7 as the ‘elect’ and in verse 5 as the ‘remnant’.

In verse 14 Paul again indicates that he is speaking of an elect remnant (from his own generation). He says that his hope is that he might be the instrument used to arouse some of his own people to envy and thus to save ‘some’ of them (see Rom 9.2,3). It is clear that Paul wishes very much that some of his own people will believe in the Messiah and be saved, and escape the national rejection.

In verse 15 the word ‘their’ is used twice, but the second ‘their’ is supplied in English translations. A literal translation of the verse can be: “For if the casting away of them is reconciliation of the world, what the reception if not life from the dead?” It is clear that Paul has in mind the elect of the Jewish nation when he says “their rejection” or “the casting away of them,” since the logical antecedent of ‘their’ in verse 15 is ‘some of them’ in verse 14. The question is, however, who are the ones received? Is it the entire nation or is it the elect? The ‘some of them’ are

³ The Greek reads: ‘always bending.’

⁴ The Greek reads: “what the reception [of them].” There are no verbs in the verse in the Greek.

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those who although temporarily cast away, would in time be saved. And, of course, only the elect receive ‘life from the dead.’ Paul is saying that when the elect remnant of the Jews who are rejected and stumbling (by being part of the nation) come to salvation, it is life from the dead—they were once dead but become alive.

It is an improper interpretation to assume that verse 15 is speaking of a future conversion of the last generation of the Jews. It isn’t stated in the verse, and it isn’t even implied.

That Israel as a nation has been rejected but not individuals (i.e., the elect remnant) is also shown by Paul’s statement in verse 23. Here he says that “*if* they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in.’ Note that the ingrafting is conditional. It is not a certain fact that the Jews will be in-grafted at some future point. It is conditional—thus Paul’s use of ‘if’.

Through verse 15, we find that Paul continues to press his argument—the Jews have been rejected as a nation but there is hope for an elect remnant. He wants his Gentile readers (v 13) to understand that there is hope for the Jews (v 24) if they believe in Jesus as the Messiah, they will be saved.

As further support for his argument about the elect remnant, Paul provides his readers with two illustrations—the leavened lump and the root (vine) and branches (v 16).

Some interpreters argue that when Paul says in verse 16: “If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy” (see Num 15.17-21), he is arguing that the firstfruits were the early believers (i.e., the patriarchs) and the ‘whole batch’ is the large number of the Jews who will be saved (from a single generation) at some time in the future. Even if the ‘firstfruits’ refers to the patriarchs, it is not obvious that the ‘whole batch’ must be understood as a future generation. Rather, it seems more reasonable to understand the ‘whole batch’ to mean all Jews (and all Gentiles) saved throughout all generations (i.e., the elect).

In addition, it seems more consistent with the rest of Scripture to interpret the ‘firstfruits’ as being Christ (1 Cor 15.20,23) rather than the patriarchs. But either way, the whole batch includes all Jewish believers; it is not a reference to the last generation of Jews before Jesus returns.

Paul’s parallel analogy in verse 18 provides support for the view that the ‘firstfruits’ is Christ. The holy root is probably best understood as being Christ (e.g., Is 11.10 [Root of Jesse]; 53.2; Jn 15.5 [vine]; Rev 5.5; 22.16), not the patriarchs. It is Christ himself who makes the branches holy, not the patriarchs. It is both Jews and Gentiles who are the branches (vss 17, 19-21) and all are made holy by the same root—Jesus Christ.

Thus, the “part of the dough offered as firstfruits” and the ‘root’ are probably references to Christ, and the ‘whole batch’ and the ‘branches’ are collectively the elect who are ‘made holy’ (i.e., saved through him).

Romans 11.1-24 teaches that there is an elect remnant of Jews along with elect Gentiles who will be saved. These verses do not seem to provide support for the view that there will be a mass conversion of the Jews at some future time. In contrast the tone of Paul’s argument in these verses seems to be that the Jews, as a nation, have been rejected but Jews as individuals, along with individual Gentiles, do come to salvation through Christ.

All Israel

In verse 25 Paul refers to a hardening which Israel has experienced in part. Notice that the word ‘harden’ is the same word that he used in verse 7. In that verse Paul was contrasting the elect with the non-elect, and it was in reference to the non-elect that he used the word ‘harden.’ Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that in verse 25 the hardened ones are the non-elect.

If the hardened are the non-elect, then their condition is permanent. Therefore the hardening is not something that occurs to the Jews for some period of time (i.e., part of the time). It is a hardening of part (some) of the Jews for all time.

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This distinction is important when we consider the word translated ‘until’. In the Greek this word is *achri* (ἄχρι). The word ‘until’ in English is commonly understood to mean that something will happen for a duration of time and then will end at a point in time when something else happens. Examples of this usage can be found in the Bible (e.g., Luke 1.20; Acts 1.2). However, we can also understand the word ‘until’ to mean a process or state that will continue beyond the point of time mentioned in the context. For example, in Acts 2.35 we don’t expect Christ’s ruling at the right hand of the father to end once he has put his enemies under his feet.⁵

In his epistles, other than in Romans 11.25, Paul uses the word *achri* thirteen times. In nine of these instances⁶ Paul clearly does not mean that whatever process or state he has in mind will cease after the time he has mentioned. In two additional instances⁷ it is possible that the process or state will not end. It appears that only in two of Paul’s uses of the word are we expected to understand the process or state to be completed at the event mentioned.⁸

Paul uses the word *achri* predominantly to refer to a process or state that continues after the event. He also refers to a specific state (‘a hardening’), in Romans 11.25, which is permanent. Therefore, we should not understand him to be saying that the hardening is going to come to an end when the full number of the Gentiles has come in. Rather, we should understand him to be saying that this hardening is permanent and will continue through the point at which the entire number of the Gentiles is saved.

Paul tells us in verse 25, in essence, that a portion (part) of Israel (the physical seed of Jacob) has been hardened and is among the non-elect. This hardening is forever (compare with v 10) and will continue through the point that the Gentiles have been called into the Kingdom.

So we come to verse 26. How are we to understand ‘All Israel’?

If ‘all Israel’ refers only to Jews, at most it can only mean the elect portion of the nation, since there is a portion that is hardened and non-elect. Paul is using the term ‘all Israel’ in verse 26 in a different sense from the word ‘Israel’ in verse 25. In verse 25 ‘Israel’ is the physical nation of the Jews (hardened and elect), but in verse 26 ‘all Israel’ is at most the elect (those who are saved). For Paul to use the term ‘Israel’ in two different senses in the same passage is not a surprise since he does it earlier (Rom 9.6), and in verse 26 he makes a significant distinction with the use of the modifier ‘all’. The use of the modifier ‘all’ is significant since Paul is telling us that not a single one of the elect remnant of the Jews will be lost. Every single one of them from every generation (the past, his own, and ones to come) will be saved.

If ‘all Israel’ refers only to Jews, then Paul is telling us that at the point that the Gentiles have all been called all the elect of Israel (‘all Israel’) will have also have been called.

But there are those who believe that the expression ‘all Israel’ in verse 26 refers to the Jewish nation as a whole at some distant point in the future, that is, that it indicates that most of the final generation of Jews will be saved. This is the prevailing view among modern interpreters. But for the following reasons it appears that this is not a correct interpretation:

- The context up to this point in Romans 11 does not support the view that Paul is speaking of a distant future generation. He has been speaking of the elect remnant of the Jews who will be saved in his own, and in any, generation to come. The context (especially verses 30 and 31) indicates that Paul is not thinking about the distant future.

⁵ Other examples include: Acts 2.29 (‘to’ — David’s tomb was expected to be there after that time); Acts 23.1 (‘to’ — Paul expected to fulfill his duty to God after that day); Acts 26.22 (‘to’ — Paul expected to have God’s help after that day).

⁶ Rom 5.13 (‘before’ — sin did not leave the world after the law was given); Rom 8.22 (‘to’ — the creation didn’t stop groaning after Paul wrote the book of Romans); 1 Cor 4.11 (‘to’ — Paul expected his sufferings to continue past that hour); 1 Cor 15.25 (‘until’ — Christ will not stop reigning even after he has put all his enemies under his feet); 2 Cor 3.14 (‘to this day’ — the veil has remained on the Jews for 2,000 years since Paul said “this day”); 2 Cor 10.13,14 (‘to’ — Paul did not think that his field of evangelism stopped with those specific readers); Gal 3.19 (‘until’ — the law did not cease to have a purpose after the Seed came); Phil 1.5 (‘until’ — Paul didn’t expect their partnership in the gospel to end after he wrote to them)

⁷ Rom 1.13; Phil 1.6

⁸ 1 Cor 11.26; Gal 4.2

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- The context of the rest of Scripture does not provide support for this view. Rather, it teaches (e.g., 1 Thes 2.14-16) that God has stopped dealing with the Jews as a special nation. But he has not stopped dealing with them as individuals (the remnant) who may be saved by grace—this is Paul’s main point through verse 24.
- In verse 26 Paul does not say ‘*then*’ but ‘*and so*’, or “in this manner ...” or “in the way just described ...” “all Israel will be saved.” Paul is not describing the next event in time—“and then something will happen”—but rather he is describing the logical way in which a major milestone will be reached: “now that these things have happened this brings to completion what was looked for.” His ‘*and so*’ is not temporal but modal, expressing *how* all Israel will be saved.
- The majority of an entire generation at one point in time is not **all**, or even most, of Israel. It is clear from the preceding portions of Romans 11 that Paul is talking about the remnant of Israel even in his time. They are not included in a future generation; but they are included in all Israel, if ‘all Israel’ includes the elect remnant from every generation.

‘All Israel’ in 11.26 could mean all elect Jews through all time, including the remnant in succeeding generations. But there is another possible interpretation. It could also mean all the elect from both Jews and Gentiles. Paul could be telling us that when God has completed his purposes with the Gentiles, all of those from Israel (i.e., all the *elect*) will have been saved.

In verse 25, by inference, there must be a portion (part) of Israel which is not hardened. This is the elect remnant. This remnant is also the full number, or the fullness (as in verse 12), of the elect Jews.

Along with this full number of Jews, there is a full number (elect portion) of the Gentiles (v 25), who are also coming into the Kingdom. Together, the fullness (elect portion) of the Jews and the fullness (elect portion) of the Gentiles make up the Israel of God (compare with Gal 6.16). Paul may be saying that, in this manner, when the full number of both Jews and Gentiles have come into the Kingdom, *all Israel* (the spiritual Israel) will be saved.

If Romans 11.26 is speaking of the salvation of all the elect of physical Israel and of the Gentiles, then the salvation of **all** Israel (all the elect) is complete when the Gentiles have come in.

What then is the mystery in verse 25? It is not a mystery that elect Jews and Gentiles will be saved. This was the promise made to Abraham (Gen 18.18). Nor is it a mystery that some Jews from every generation will be saved. In fact, Paul makes reference to the elect remnant who will individually come to believe in Jesus when he speaks (v 28) of the Jews who are (temporarily) the enemies of the Gentile readers of the Epistle.⁹ He says that they are elect¹⁰ (see

⁹ Someone might say that an **elect** Jew could not be an enemy of the Gentiles. In response we should consider Saul (Paul) before his conversion. He says that he persecuted the Church and tried to destroy it (1 Cor 15.9; Gal 1.13, Phil 3.6). He was an enemy of the Church, yet he was elect (Gal 1.15). An elect Jew certainly can be an enemy of the Church until he is converted.

¹⁰ Some commentators state that *election* in verse 28 isn’t speaking of an election to salvation, but rather a national election. Yet verse 26 and 27 speak about salvation. It is strange that there is no connection between verse 28 and the preceding. On what grounds can it be argued that Paul moves abruptly to a new aspect of his subject, seeing in the first instance the Jews in a relationship to God based on the gospel, and in the second a national relationship to God based on his relationship with the fathers?

Consider every use of the words *elect*, *election* and *chosen* in the NT (outside the three uses in Romans 11 [5, 7, 28]): Mt 22.14; 24.22, 24, 31; Mk 13.20, 22, 27; Lk 18.7; 23.35*; Acts 9.15*; Rom 8.33; 9.11; 16.13; Col 3.12; 1 Thes 1.4; 1 Tim 5.21; 2 Tim 2.10; Titus 1.1; 1 Pet 1.1; 2 Pet 1.10; 2.4*, 6*; 2.9; 2 Jn 1.1, 13; Rev 17.14. All of the uses except those marked with a * clearly refer to the election to salvation by grace. Three of the references apply to Christ and obviously do not apply to salvation. Acts 9.15 may, or may not, be applied in this way. Paul was saved by grace and therefore elect, but Acts 9.15 may also have a broader meaning. All of Paul’s other uses of *elect* (*election*) in Romans or in his other letters mean salvation by grace and have nothing to do with selecting a group of people (some of whom are saved and some of whom are not).

We should start with the assumption that Paul is consistent in his usage of the word *elect* (*election*). If we can find a reasonable interpretation which keeps a consistent meaning we should accept it. If we cannot find a reasonable interpretation, then we can look for an alternate interpretation. But, then it is necessary to demonstrate from the context that the alternate meaning for the word is supported.

Is there a reasonable interpretation that preserves a common meaning of the word? Yes, it is as follows: “As far as the gospel is concerned they [the elect Jews] are [currently] enemies [just like I, Paul, was against the Church] on your account; but as far as

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also Rom 11.2) and are loved because of the patriarchs. Because God's gifts are irrevocable (v 29), the elect will be saved — even if the rest of the Jewish nation is cut off.

The mystery has nothing to do with the fact that Jews will be saved. It has rather to do with how God is going to complete **all** Israel, by grafting in the Gentiles.

The interpretation of the promise to Abraham among the Jews was that Gentiles would in some way be saved and that they would likely have to become physical Jews through circumcision. But the mystery is that God is going to make Gentiles into spiritual Israel (Eph 3.6-9; Col 1.26, 27)—true members of the Covenant. No longer will there be separate nations (Rom 10.12, 13; Gal 3.28), the dividing wall between Jew and Gentile will be abolished and the two will be one (Eph 2.14-15). The Gentiles will really be the seed of Abraham.¹¹

Paul illustrates the truth that all elect Jews and Gentiles are going to be brought into the spiritual family of Abraham and Jacob by quoting from Isaiah, and saying that their sins will be taken away in Christ (Rom 11.26b, 27). He could be understood as referring to the salvation of the elect Jews only. But it seems to be more consistent to understand him to be thinking of the Messianic age in general, in which Gentiles are grafted into spiritual Israel, since it is clear that Isaiah 59.21 is including the New Covenant age. In this age, Gentiles who are saved are part of spiritual Israel—the Israel of God (Gal 6.16)—and fellow citizens with the circumcised (Eph 2.12, 13, 19).

In Romans 11.32 Paul says that God is now treating all men alike (both Jews and Gentiles). He has bound over all men to disobedience so that he can show mercy on them all (both Jews and Gentiles). This is the concluding argument for Paul. He has shown his readers that Gentiles are grafted into spiritual Israel and thereby are included in the Covenant. He has shown that God has both elect Jews and elect Gentiles. He has shown that all men are by nature disobedient, but all men (Jews and Gentiles) can become part of spiritual Israel through the mercy of God. It is for this reason that Paul writes his doxology of praise. What an amazing thing God has done in bringing Gentiles into the Covenant family with the Jews. “And so all Israel will be saved.”

Other Considerations

1. Israel According to the Flesh no Longer Exists

What is an Israelite? Who is a descendant of Jacob? We shouldn't think that this is as simple to answer as it first appears. If the modern nation of Israel can't answer this question, can we? The physical descendants of Jacob's twelve sons can no longer be identified. Those who call themselves 'Jews' and apply to live in Israel today may have blond hair and blue eyes, may have dark skin and black curly hair, or may have olive skin and dark brown hair. Which of these racial/ethnic groups are the descendants of Jacob according to the flesh?

Proof of lineage from Jacob was taken seriously by the Jews. For example, at the time of the return from the captivity some descendants of the priests could not find their family records (Ezra 2.61-63) and were excluded from practicing as priests. In a similar way, Matthew and Luke go to great efforts to demonstrate that Jesus was a legitimate Jew and a legitimate descendant of David (both as a physical descendant and as a legal heir to the throne).

In contrast, what person today who calls himself a Jew is able to show that he is descended from Jacob? There is not a single one.

Nor is it enough to say that a Jew is someone who holds to the religion of the OT. Today a person who calls himself a Jew can be an atheist and can still call himself Jewish. In addition, the Jews of today don't have the same religion that the Jews had at the time of Paul and Christ. Since the Jews rejected their Messiah (and thus followed the

election [God's free saving call] is concerned, they are loved [just like I, Paul, was] on account of the patriarchs [the Covenant made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob].”

¹¹ See also Ephesians 2.11-13, where Paul says that the Gentiles have been brought into citizenship in Christ, and Col 1.26, 27, where Paul says that the mystery is the fact that Christ indwells Gentiles.

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destruction of Jerusalem), Judaism has ceased to exist in the OT or NT sense and has been replaced with an imitation of OT Judaism.

To be *Jewish* is something cultural; it is not religious belief, nor is it physical descent from Jacob. Who then is a Jew today? The people Paul is so concerned about (Rom 10.1-3) no longer exist as an identifiable people. Israel according to the flesh no longer exists.

Furthermore, Jesus condemns those who call themselves Jews and are not (Rev 3.9). Paul tells us that “[a] man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit ...” (Rom 2.28-29) Christians are the true Jews (Israel) of God. Those people who call themselves Jews and are not, are of the Synagogue of Satan (Rev 3.9).

2. Christ’s Return and the Conversion of the Jews

As I noted above, the return of Jesus will be without warning, sudden, and generally unexpected—there will be no **special** signs or evidences to indicate when he will return (Matt 24.36-44; 25.1-13; 1 Thes 5.1-3; 2 Pet 3.10).

For example, Jesus says that with regard to the sign of his “coming and of the end of the age” (Matt 24.3) that “[n]o one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” (v 36) He continues: “As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man ... Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ... because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him.” (Matt 24.37, 42, 44)

Notice that this teaching of Jesus is followed by the parable of the Ten Virgins, which illustrates the need for watchfulness at all times. Then we read: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him ...” (Matt 25.31ff) Our watchfulness is to extend until the moment Jesus comes on the Day of Judgement.

A flaw in the eschatology of many is their expectation of a future period of earthly prosperity and peace (some say 1,000 years) before Christ establishes the New Heavens and New Earth. This view undermines the need for watchfulness in every generation. If this period of peace and prosperity has not begun, which I believe most people would have to agree is the case, then Jesus’ instructions about urgent watchfulness have little meaning for us today.¹²

In a similar vein, if the mass conversion of Jews has not taken place and is to be expected before the return of Christ, then we don’t yet need to be watching for Jesus’ return. But if we are to expect the mass conversion of the Jews just prior to his return (as many claim), then we are to be looking for a sign showing when he will return. Jesus explicitly says we won’t be given signs of his return.

I can put the matter simply by asking how we should answer this question: “Do we believe that the Lord Jesus Christ **could** return to the earth in the next few minutes to bring all mankind before his Judgement Throne?” If our answer is “yes,” then it is unlikely that there will be a mass conversion of the Jews.

If our answer is “no,” then we are ignoring the clear warning of Jesus and Paul to be ready at all times, since the Judgement Day can come upon us suddenly at any moment: “Now brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night ...” (1 Thes 5.1-2)

¹² I have heard some people argue that these reference to watchfulness deal with our personal need to be prepared to face death. Although we are all to be prepared at any moment to face God in eternity, it is faulty exegesis that ignores the corporate and final nature of the references to Jesus’ coming.