

And So All Israel Will Be Saved

Rom 11:25-26

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²⁵For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery—so that you will not be wise in your own estimation—that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; ²⁶and so all Israel will be saved; just as it is written, “The Deliverer will come from Zion, He will remove ungodliness from Jacob.”

Context of Romans 11:25-26

“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.”¹

The issue of Romans 9-11

The issue in chapters 9-11 is whether God’s OT word has failed (Rom 9:6). Paul’s answer is that, in God’s sovereign plan, not all ethnic Israel is true Israel (Rom 9:6-7). In Romans 10, he explains that the Jews had sought to establish their own righteousness (Rom 10:3); the Gentiles had discovered that the good news of salvation is found through faith in Christ (Rom 10:6-21). In Rom 11:1, Paul raises the issue that follows from his discussion in Romans 9-10: “Has God completely cast off or rejected the Jews?” (Rom 11:1). Paul begins his answer by denying that God has completely rejected the Jews. He cites as proof the fact that he himself is “*an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin*” (Rom 11:1). Greg Bahnsen summarizes the rest of Paul’s answer, “God has not totally rejected the Jews (vv. 2-4). His love and election necessitates a remnant

¹ Merkle, “Romans 11,” 711.

among Israel (vv. 5-6), even though many were hardened by their self-righteousness (vv. 7-10). Rather, Israel has rejected the Messiah as her savior, with the result that salvation would come to the Gentiles (cf. Acts 13:46, 18:6, 28:28).²

Interpretive Issues Regarding Rom 11:25-26

* 11:25—*What does “until” mean?* “The phrase brings matters ‘up to’ a certain point or ‘until’ a certain goal is reached. It does not itself determine the state of affairs after the termination.”³ What happens after the “until” point is reached can only be determined from the context.

* 11:25—*What is “the fullness of the Gentiles”?* Leon Morris states, “NIV may well be right in seeing a reference to number. In that case a certain number of Gentiles are to be saved, and God is waiting until that number has been reached before taking action for Israel.”⁴ However, “it is also possible to understand the expression as the fullness of the blessing of the Gentiles or the full contribution of the Gentiles, or the Gentiles as a whole.”⁵

* 11:26—*What does “and so” (Greek = kai houtōs) mean?* There are four basic options in interpreting the word *houtōs*: (1) *Houtōs* might have a temporal meaning, i.e., “And then [after the events depicted in v. 25b] all Israel will be saved.” (2) *Houtōs* could introduce a consequence or conclusion, i.e., “And in consequence of this process [v. 25b] all Israel will be saved.” (3) *Houtōs* could have its usual meaning of denoting the manner in which an action takes place, i.e., ‘in this manner’ all Israel will be saved.” (4) In light of various problems with the first three options, Douglas Moo concludes, “Taking *houtōs* to indicate manner and linking it with what comes before—is to be preferred: ‘And in this manner all Israel will be saved.’ The ‘manner’ of Israel’s salvation is the process that Paul has outlined in vv. 11-24 and summarized in v. 25b: 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.”⁶

* 11:26—*What does “all Israel will be saved” mean?* There are three main interpretations of the phrase “all Israel will be saved.” “All Israel” is seen either as: (1) all the elect, both Jew and Gentile; (2) the ethnic nation of Israel as a whole; or (3) all the elect of ethnic Israel throughout history.

² Bahnsen, “Gospel Prosperity,” 6.

³ Robertson, *Israel of God*, 179.

⁴ Morris, *Romans*, 420.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 719-20.

* 11:26—What does “the Deliverer will come from Zion” mean and when does that *occur*? Paul is quoting from Isa 59:20, but is not quoting verbatim, and has made significant changes to that verse. With respect to the meaning of “Zion,” P. W. L. Walker asks, “Is this a reference to physical Jerusalem, or does it now refer to the ‘heavenly Zion/Jerusalem? Is the event predicted in the Old Testament still future to Paul, or has it already begun to take place? Thirdly, why has Paul not retained the original wording of Isaiah 59:20 (which in the Masoretic text had read, ‘the Deliverer will come *to* Zion’)?”⁷

Interpretive Approaches to Rom 11:25-26

As with Dan 9:24-27, there are many different interpretations of Rom 11:25-26. The interpretations tend to fall into two main groups: (1) Those that see the passage as indicating a future, end-time mass conversion of ethnic Jews to Christ just before or at the time of the *parousia* (end-time interpretations); and (2) Those that do not see the passage as indicating an end-time mass conversion of Jews to Christ (non-end-time interpretations).⁸

End-time interpretations

*Non-dispensationalist interpretation*⁹

This interpretation holds that the word “until” suggests a reversal of the present condition: “Israel’s partial hardening will last only until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in—and then it will be removed.”¹⁰ “Decisive for this interpretation is the context, for Paul has throughout vv. 11-24 implied that Israel would one day experience a spiritual rejuvenation that would extend far beyond the present bounds of the remnant.”¹¹

Second, this view holds that “all Israel” in 11:26 denotes the ethnic and “corporate entity of the nation of Israel as it exists at a particular point in time [i.e., the end-time].”¹² It also holds that there will be a mass conversion of ethnic

⁷ Walker, *Jesus*, 137-38; see also Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel*, 172; Morris, *Romans*, 421.

⁸ Sam Storms calls the two major camps the *Future Restoration* and the *Historical Remnant* views. Storms, *Kingdom Come*, 303-34. There are also preterist interpretations of the passage which view it as having been fulfilled with the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. King, “And So All Israel,” n.p.; Thompson, “Romans 11:11-32,” n.p. Those interpretations are mentioned here but will not be discussed since they are held only by very few and have little influence outside of preterist circles.

⁹ E.g., Bahnsen, “Gospel Prosperity,” 4-7; Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel*, 163-75; Moo, *Romans*, 715-28; Murray, *Romans*, 91-103; Riddlebarger, *Amillennialism*, 180-94.

¹⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 717.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 721, 723. Merkle counters this by noting, “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

Israelites in connection with the second coming of Christ. Moo states, "The fact that it will take place only after the salvation of all elect Gentiles suggests that it will be closely associated with the return of Christ in glory."¹³

Dispensationalist interpretation

The dispensationalist interpretation follows the basic outline of the non-dispensationalist end-time interpretation but adds its own distinctive doctrines:

* *The rapture of the church.* "The fullness of the Gentiles began with the calling out of the Church. . . . It will continue until the Rapture of the Church. Blindness and hardening of Israel will continue as long as the Church is present in the world."¹⁴

* *National salvation from tribulation, not from sin.* "And so all Israel will be saved" means that the nation of Israel will be "delivered . . . from the terrible Tribulation by the Messiah, the Deliverer."¹⁵

* *Israel's dominance during the Millennium.* The millennium will reflect the nation of Israel's dominance in which "the Gentiles will be Israel's servants."¹⁶

None of dispensationalism's unique doctrines (the pretribulational rapture, the restoration of Israel as a nation, the millennium) is found in Romans at all. Paul's concern in Romans 9-11 is with Israel's *spiritual* condition; nothing is stated or implied about any national, political, or physical restoration.

Non-End-time interpretations

*"All Israel' is the elect of ethnic Israel throughout history" interpretation*¹⁷

In Rom 10:12 Paul says that "*there is no distinction between Jew and Gentile*" concerning the plan of salvation. "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."¹⁸ In other words, "*all Israel*" in Romans 11:26 means the

small fraction of Jews which is not as climactic as it might first appear." Merkle, "Romans 11," 717. Although Moo is a proponent of end-time interpretation, he acknowledges that "the interpretation that takes the phrase to refer to the elect among Israel throughout time deserves consideration as a serious alternative." Moo, *Romans*, 723.

¹³ Moo, *Romans*, 725.

¹⁴ McGee, *Reasoning Through Romans*, 27; see also MacDonald, *Believer's*, 1727.

¹⁵ Witmer, "Romans," 486.

¹⁶ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 508.

¹⁷ E.g., Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 139-47; Lehrer, *New Covenant*, 93-105; Merkle, "Romans 11," 709-21.

¹⁸ Merkle, "Romans 11," 712.

totality of the elect among Israel. The salvation of Israel, therefore, does not take place exclusively at the end-time, but takes place throughout the era between Christ's first and second coming."¹⁹

Proponents of this view state that the issue of 11:1 "is *not*, 'Has God cast off ethnic Israel with respect to his special plan for their future?' . . . The question Paul asks is, 'Has God cut off ethnic Israel *altogether*?'"²⁰ With respect to the partial "hardening" of Israel (11:7, 25), in both vv. 7 and 25 Paul is speaking quantitatively, not temporally. Further, the "hardening" does not imply a change after some future point toward the end of the age. Merkle puts it this way: "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."²¹

By saying that a partial hardening has occurred *until* the full number of the Gentiles has come in, *and so* all Israel will be saved, Paul is not saying that *then* (i.e., *after* the full number of the Gentiles has come in) all Israel will be saved, but *in this manner* all Israel will be saved. The manner in which "all Israel will be saved" is what Paul has been describing in the earlier part of the chapter: "(a) through the unbelief of many Israelites salvation is coming to the Gentiles, and (b) by the salvation of the Gentiles Israelites are being moved to jealousy. This has been happening in the past, it is happening now, and will continue to happen."²²

Finally, this view maintains that "all Israel" (11:26) does refer to ethnic Israel but not to ethnic Israel as a whole; rather, "all Israel" refers to the elect remnant within ethnic Israel. In other words, "'The fullness of the Gentiles' = the full number of the saved Gentiles, *all* of them; 'all Israel' = the fullness of Jews, the full number of non-petrified, i.e., of saved Jews."²³ "'All Israel' is the church (all the elect, both Jew and Gentile)" interpretation²⁴

This interpretation adopts the same basic perspective on the passage as the "all Israel is the elect of ethnic Israel throughout history" interpretation but defines "all Israel" as the church (i.e., elect Jews and Gentiles), rather than "all Israel" as only elect Jews.

Rom 11:25 refers simply to "Israel," whereas Rom 11:26 refers to "all Israel." The use of "all" indicates that there is a difference in the meaning of "Israel" in the two verses: v. 25 refers to the ethnic Israel; v. 26 refers to spiritual Israel, which consists of all saved Jews and Gentiles. In connection with this, proponents of

¹⁹ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 145.

²⁰ Merkle, "Romans 11," 713.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 715, 716.

²² Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 145.

²³ Lenski, *Interpretation*, 727.

²⁴ E.g., Irons, "Paul's Theology," 101-24; Robertson, *Israel of God*, 167-92.

this view note that one of the things Paul has been doing throughout Romans essentially is to redefine “true Israel.” For example, in Rom 2:25-29 he redefined the value of circumcision. In Rom 9:6-8, 24-26, 30-33 Paul made clear that there is an Israel within Israel, and that membership among God’s people is not related to circumcision or ethnic relation to Abraham. Thus, “If being an Israelite doesn’t necessarily make one a *true* Israelite, then one need not be an *Israelite* to be a true Israelite. The door has now been opened to allow for Gentiles to be reckoned as true Israelites.”²⁵ Indeed, in Rom 10:4-12 Paul proclaims that the only criterion to define “Israel” is faith in Christ.

Taking “*all Israel*” as Paul’s redefined Israel-of-faith, consisting of believing Jews and Gentiles together, provides a satisfying answer to the question: “Has God rejected his people?” (Rom 11:1). Lee Irons concludes by focusing on the question that Paul addresses in Romans 11: “How is it that the vast majority of post-Pentecost Jews have rejected Jesus as the Messiah and are therefore lost?” He answers: “Given this undeniable datum, how are we going to justify theologically the non-negotiable truth that God’s promises to Israel as a *people*, a *corporate* identity, cannot be broken? I posit that . . . the church is the continuation, in fact, the consummation of God’s promises to Israel.”²⁶

Additional Comments Regarding Rom 11:25-26

Non-end-time interpretations of Rom 11:25-26 are not inconsistent with large-scale conversions of Jews. Hoekema points out, “There is nothing in the passage which would rule out such a future conversion or future conversions, as long as one does not insist that the passage points *only* to the future, or that it describes a conversion of Israel which occurs *after* the full number of Gentiles has been gathered in.”²⁷

The “fullness” (11:12), “acceptance” (11:15), and “grafting in” (11:23-24), including any mass conversions of Jews that may occur, should not be divorced from the process of gospel-proclamation inaugurated at Christ’s first advent. Christ made clear that the gospel must be preached to the whole world “*even to the end of the age*.”²⁸ In Rom 10:8-17 Paul argued that Jews and Gentiles are in the same position and will be converted by the same means: the preaching of the gospel. “Paul’s point here is that *as far as the obtaining of salvation is concerned*, there is no distinction between Jew and Greek. If this is so, a future period of time in which only Jews will be saved, or in which Jews will be saved in a way different from the way in which Greeks or Gentiles are saved, would seem to be ruled out.”²⁹

²⁵ Irons, “Paul’s Theology,” 119.

²⁶ Ibid., 122.

²⁷ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 147.

²⁸ Matt 28:18-20; see also Matt 24:14; Acts 1:8.

²⁹ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 142, emphasis in original..

Further, “Paul’s conviction that ‘jealousy’ will provoke Israel’s response [Rom 11:11] sits uneasily with the notion of an end-time event.”³⁰ It is not the removal of the church from the earth (dispensationalism) or the end of Gentile conversions that leads to the conversion of the Jews but “*the mercy shown to you*” (11:31): “It was through the Jews’ disobedience that the Gentiles came to experience God’s mercy but it will be through the mercy God has shown to the Gentiles that he will bring mercy to the Jews.”³¹ That implies the presence and winsome witness of Gentile believers to the Jews.

If the “fullness of Israel” is limited to a mass end-time conversion, it is contrary to the purpose of the “fullness of Israel,” which is to bless the Gentiles and the world (Rom 11:12, 15). Just as the Gentiles and the world have experienced their spiritual “riches” during this age, Paul’s argument suggests that Israel’s “fullness” will lead to great spiritual blessings yet to be experienced during this age.

Finally, the timing of the *parousia* is completely unpredictable.³² If the “fullness of Israel” is limited only to an end-time occurrence, that would suggest the predictability of the *parousia*. On the other hand: The sign of the salvation of the fullness of Israel [that is not limited to the end-time] does not enable us to date the second coming of Christ with exactness. It tells us that Jews will continue to be converted to Christianity throughout the entire era between the first and second comings of Christ, as the full number of the Gentiles is being gathered in. In such Jewish conversions, therefore, we are to see a sign of the certainty of Christ’s return [but not its timing]. In the meantime, this sign should bind on our hearts the urgency of the church’s mission to the Jews.³³

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³⁰ Walker, *Jesus*, 141n.103.

³¹ Morris, *Romans*, 425.

³² See main text, chapter 8, the section “The second coming of Christ is totally unpredictable.”

³³ Hoekema, *Bible and Future*, 147.

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