

Is There A Future for Israel in Romans 11?

By Steve Lehrer

I want to propose an interpretation of Romans 11 that I believe flows out of New Covenant Theology. But please don't misunderstand me. I am certainly not saying that you are not a New Covenant theologian if you disagree with my interpretation of Romans 11! Romans 11 is a very difficult passage of Scripture. All difficult passages of Scripture will have a variety of understandings depending on one's hermeneutic and one's understanding of the immediate and larger context. As I have wrestled with this passage of Scripture I have come to some conclusions based on my overall understanding of how Scripture fits together.

I want you to know my conclusions ahead of time so you can mull them over as you think through my argument. Hopefully you have just read my article, *Israel: An Unbelieving People*. There I argued that God's evaluation of Israel has remained consistent throughout biblical history: Israel has always been a nation of unbelievers. This evaluation reaches a fever pitch in the Gospels and the book of Acts—so much so, that it seems as if God has turned His back on all Israelites forever, and is now only in the business of saving Gentiles.¹ This is foundational to my understanding of Romans 11. I will proceed to argue, standing on that foundation, that Paul is attempting to remind those Gentiles in the church at Rome that God will still save those Jews who repent and believe. The Gentiles in Rome were becoming arrogant. They were beginning to think that they were the new chosen people, and that God was utterly finished with the Jews. The thrust of Paul's argument in Romans 11 is quite simply that God still saves Jews and will continue to do so throughout the New Covenant era. In light of this, let's turn our attention to Scripture and examine Paul's careful argument.

The Argument of Romans 9-10

Paul says a whole lot in Romans 9-10. It should not be surprising that Paul's message in these chapters is extremely important for our understanding of Romans 11. In these chapters Paul drives home 3 main points: **(1)** God has always saved only a remnant of Israel; **(2)** God has the right to show mercy, or harden, whoever He desires; and **(3)** Israel has rebelled against God throughout her history. I want to track this thought process throughout Romans 9-10 in order to provide you with an accurate understanding for jumping into Romans 11.

In Romans 9, after Paul recalls all of the amazing privileges God has given to Israel over the centuries, he causes us to readjust our thinking. Because of all of their privileges and promises, one wonders why they seemed to have so totally rejected this great salvation Paul describes in Romans 8. One might think God has gone back on His promises—or, that He has been unable to overcome Israel's rebelliousness. But Paul tells us that we must forsake the idea that all of Israel was God's true people. Instead, only a portion of Israel has ever been believers: "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel" (Romans 9:6). Paul is concerned with showing that God's promises to Israel have not failed, and he goes to great lengths to make sure that these promises be correctly understood. The physical nation of Israel was

never promised eternal salvation. Paul argues that this has always been a revealed truth by showing God's sovereignty in election among the children of Abraham and Isaac:

Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. On the contrary, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: "At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son." Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad—in order that God's purpose in election might stand: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, "The older will serve the younger." Just as it is written: "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:7-13).

Unlike Isaac and Ishmael—who were children of different mothers—Jacob and Esau not only had the same mother, but also were created in the same act of conception! But God chose to set His saving love on Jacob and not Esau. God's promise of salvation to the descendants of Abraham did not fail. However Esau, who was clearly a child of Abraham, was not saved. This leaves a bit of a theological problem for us. Paul's answer to this problem is two-fold: First, since God is the creator He can have mercy on whomever He wants and harden whomever He wants (vv. 14-21). Second, God has always promised only to save a remnant of the descendants of Abraham according to the flesh, and He will continue to do so:

"Isaiah cries out concerning Israel: 'Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, only the remnant will be saved.' 'For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality.' It is just as Isaiah said previously: 'Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah'" (Romans 9:27-29).

At the end of Romans 9 and continuing through Romans 10, the idea is introduced that God has given faith to the Gentiles, while the Jews who had everything were unable to find God:

"What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works. They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone'" (Romans 9:30-32).

Quoting the prophet Isaiah, Paul makes the argument that the Gentiles responded to the God's offer of salvation while the Israelites rebelled: "And Isaiah boldly says, 'I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me.' But concerning Israel he says, 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people'" (Romans 10:20-21). Thus, Paul has established the truths that, **(1)** God has always saved only a remnant of Israel, **(2)** God has the right to show mercy, or to harden, whoever He desires, and **(3)** Israel has rebelled against God throughout her

history. Now the Apostle can build the rest of his argument concerning Israel on these foundations.

Romans 11: *When is Paul writing about?*

Before we examine the “ins and outs” of Paul’s argument in Romans 11, it is important that we establish the time period about which Paul is writing. The majority of commentators hold that Paul is carefully building an argument about the salvation of national Israel—reaching its climax in verses 25 and 26—concluding that in the *distant future* all or most of national Israel will be saved. But the passage seems to refer exclusively to the present time in Paul’s day. I don’t believe that Romans 11 is prophecy about end-time events. There is overwhelming evidence in the passage that Paul is concerned with the *present time* rather than the future:

- In Romans 11:1, Paul’s answer to the question about whether God had rejected his people deals with Paul’s first century salvation, not something in the distant future.
- In verse 5, Paul answers the question about God’s rejection of Israel with a reference to his contemporary situation: “So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.”
- In verses 13 and 14 Paul refers to his hope that his own evangelistic work with the Gentiles in the first century will arouse Israelites in that general time period to envy the Gentiles for having God’s salvation: “I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them.”
- Paul sees a pattern in the amazing wisdom of God, revealing a mystery of His plan: The God-ordained fall of Israel led, and is leading to, the salvation of the Gentiles. This is causing Jews to become jealous, which is leading to their (some Jews) salvation (Fall-Salvation-Jealousy-Salvation). In verses 30 and 31 Paul tells us that the salvation of the Gentiles—which leads to the jealousy of the Jews, which leads to the salvation of the Jews—was all taking place “now” in Paul’s day: “Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have **now** received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have **now** become disobedient in order that they too may **now** receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you.”

Did God Reject His People? No! Remember the Remnant

Paul never changes the main focus of his inquiry throughout Romans 9-11. The Apostle is relentless in his analysis of this important question: Has God *utterly* rejected Israel? The constant answer is, “No. God has always saved a remnant of Israel, and He will continue to do so.” In verse 1 of Romans 11, Paul asks the question that remains the central focus of the entire chapter: “I ask then: Did God reject his people?”

Now there are two possibilities concerning the meaning of Paul’s question. First, he could be asking, “Did God reject Israel as a nation of people and their future salvation?” The second possibility is that he could be asking, “Did God *utterly* reject Israel so that no more Israelites will ever be saved?” Paul makes it clear that the meaning of his question is certainly the latter, because his answer in verse 1 is that God is presently, in Paul’s day, saving a remnant: “By no means (God has not rejected His people)! I am an Israelite

myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.” The evidence—that Paul is a Jew and that he has been saved—tells us that God has not utterly rejected Israel.

Our investigation so far has led us in the opposite direction of the most popular interpretation. Paul begins his argument not arguing for the salvation of the majority of ethnic Israel in the distant future, but rather the salvation of a tiny remnant of ethnic Israel in Paul’s day. This line of argument continues through verse 5:

What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don’t you know what the Scripture says in the passage about Elijah—how he appealed to God against Israel: “Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me”? And what was God’s answer to him? “I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.” So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace. (11:2-5).

Paul asks the same question and gives the same answer all over again in verse 7: “What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.” At first, given Israel’s rejection of the Gospel, you might think that none of Israel obtained salvation, but Paul assures us here in verse 7 that there were elect within Israel and they were saved just as he assured us earlier in verses 1, 4, and 5.

Dealing with Difficult Language

Most commentators think that Paul changes tracks in his argument at verse 11. Douglas Moo neatly divides the passage into two sections: “Israel’s rejection is neither total (11:1-10) nor final (11:11-32).”² According to Moo, verses 1-10 deal with the remnant as I have also argued, but Moo thinks that verses 11-32 address the future of national Israel. Yet verse 11 gives no evidence of any change in Paul’s argument: “Again I ask: Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.”

I have already made the argument that the envy of Israel is happening at the time of Paul’s writing. The question in verse 11 remains the same as it has from verse 1. That much is clear. The difficulty with my view begins in the next verse. Verse 12 introduces language, which upon first reading seems to introduce an eschatological and total future salvation of Israel: “But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater **riches will** their **fullness** bring!” This language continues in verse 15: “For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their **acceptance** be but **life from the dead**?” I have already introduced a pattern of thought that I believe is part of the warp and woof of Paul’s thinking in this passage: *God ordained the fall of Israel which led and is leading to the salvation of the Gentiles. This is causing Jews to become jealous, which is leading to their (some Jews) salvation (Fall-Salvation-Jealousy-Salvation).* The chart below notes parallels between verses with this pattern of thought. You will notice that some of the more difficult language found in verses 12 and 15 can be explained by other verses that express the same thought in clearer language:

Disobedience (Jews)	Salvation (Gentiles)	Envy (Jews)	Salvation (Jews)
11- Rather, because of their transgression	salvation has come to the Gentiles	to make Israel envious.	
12- But if their transgression means	riches for the world,		How much more will their fullness bring!
and their loss means	riches for the Gentiles,		
13-	Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry	14- in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy	and save some of them
15- For if their rejection	is the reconciliation of the world		what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?
25- Israel has experienced a hardening	until the full number of the Gentiles has come in		And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written:
30- as a result of their disobedience	Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy		
31- so they too have now become disobedient	as a result of God's mercy to you		in order that they too may now receive mercy

Some of the most difficult pieces of Romans 11 for my particular understanding of this passage are listed under the salvation (Jews) section. But notice that parallel in thought—with “fullness,” “their acceptance” and “all Israel will be saved”—to “save some of them” and “that they too may now receive mercy.” I freely admit that the language Paul uses at times seems to argue for the interpretation of a future full national salvation of Israel. But the remnant and partial salvation language is equally strong. In addition, it also has the added bonus of being the driving force of the argument. The idea that all of ethnic Israel will someday in the distant future be saved is foreign to the larger context.

Boastful Gentiles Rebuked

We must try and jump into the sandals (and perhaps togas) of the Gentile Christians that Paul is addressing in the church in Rome. The Gentile Christians had experienced nothing but grief from the hands of the Jews. It seemed as if the Jews were constantly persecuting them.³ Remember that they had all read (or heard) the story about both Jesus and Paul turning from the Jews to the Gentiles with the Gospel.⁴ They had begun to believe that they were now God's true people, and that the Jews were no longer in God's plan of salvation. Paul gives a stinging rebuke to these Gentiles for carelessly dismissing the Jews:

If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in." Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either.

Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree (Romans 11:17-24)!

Notice that the thrust of Paul's argument is not as the popular interpretation would have us believe, that there will be an overwhelming conversion of national Israel in the distant future. Rather, the Apostle seems to say: "You think Israel is entirely rejected and you Gentiles have a corner on the market of salvation. You are wrong. It is actually more natural for Jews to be saved than for Gentiles to be saved."

"Until" (*achris hou*) in verse 25

The word "until" in verse 25 creates great amounts of confusion. Here is the verse: "I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part **until** the full number of the Gentiles has come in" (emphasis mine). Many assume that this verse must mean that the partial hardening of Israel will continue up to the point in time when the final Gentile is saved. At that point in time, the partial hardening will cease and all Israel will repent and believe. This understanding of the verse is a contextual train wreck, in that it introduces thoughts that are utterly new to the argument. This interpretation neglects an important option for our understanding of the Greek phrase underlying the word "until" in verse 25. "Until" is a translation of the Greek phrase *achris hou*. "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. The subsequent circumstances can be learned only from the context."⁵

- Acts 22:4 “I persecuted the followers of this Way to (*achris hou*) their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.” Notice, the use of our phrase here is focused on the goal of persecuting Christians to death and not the state of affairs after they are dead.
- Hebrews 4:12 “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to (*achris hou*) dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.” Once again the emphasis is not on what happens beyond the division of soul and spirit, but the goal or termination point.
- 1 Corinthians 11:26 “For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until (*achris hou*) he comes.” The point of “until” in this verse is that you proclaim the Lord’s death by participating in the Lord’s Supper all the way to the goal or termination point, which is the Lord’s return. Our phrase has no reference to the state of affairs after His return.⁶

Thus, in Romans 11:25 the use of our phrase does not refer to the state of affairs occurring after the goal or termination point: “I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part **until** the full number of the Gentiles has come in.” Just what happens after the full number of Gentiles has come in, which is the termination point, is not addressed in this verse. But we do know from our examination of the passage up to this point that Israel has experienced this partial hardening so that there has always been a tiny remnant of Israelites that God calls to himself. There will continue to be a remnant of believers in Israel and a majority of unbelievers all the way up to the time when the full number of Gentiles come in. The popular view says, “Okay, I can live with that. The very next verse tells us exactly what happens *after* the termination point when the full number of Gentiles come in, and that is that the entire nation of Israel will be saved.” Not so fast! Now that we have established that “until” does not emphasize what happens after the full number of Gentiles come in, let’s see if verse 26 refers to that or not.

“And so (*kai houtos*) all Israel shall be saved”

The Greek phrase *kai houtos* is often read incorrectly as “and then...” which gives it a temporal flavor. But in the 205 times that it is used in the New Testament, it never has an unambiguously temporal meaning. It is far better to read it as “and in this way or in this manner...” This fits the context perfectly. Paul is emphasizing the amazing way or manner in which God has chosen for all of the elect of Israel to be saved. In fact, the particular manner in which God plans to save His elect within Israel is the revelation of a mystery in the all-wise plan of God.⁷ The emphasis of verse 26 is the *pattern* in which God will save His people, rather than the *amount* of Israelites to be saved. The God-ordained fall of Israel led, and is leading to, the salvation of the Gentiles. That is amazing. But what makes one positively marvel at God’s wisdom is that the salvation of the Gentiles is causing Jews to become jealous, which is leading to their salvation!

So, the point of Romans 11:26 is not something absolutely new to the context—that God is going to save every last ethnic Israelite who happens to be alive after the final elect Gentile has come to faith. Instead, it is better to interpret verse 26 within the

framework of Paul's argument: that God has not forsaken the Jews entirely, but even from within this rebellious people God has his elect. This was shocking news to the Gentiles. They had seen and heard about Jesus' and Paul's rejection of the Jews, who were still unbelieving and were persecuting the church. As we saw, Paul adds more to his argument than just those bare facts. He gives us a glimpse at the all-wise plan of God! God not only used the fall of Israel to bring salvation to the Gentiles, but He is using the salvation of the Gentiles to stir up jealousy and bring elect Israelites to salvation. This will continue all the way up *until* the full number of the Gentiles come to faith.

What Does "All Israel" Mean?

There are 5 options to consider:⁸

1. All ethnic descendants of Abraham. This option is knocked out in Romans 9:6.
2. All ethnic descendants of Abraham living when God initiates a special working among the Jewish people. This option and option #3 are variations on the most popular interpretation that I have argued against throughout this paper as missing the context. These options specifically miss the emphasis on the contemporary nature of Paul's argument, as well as the consistent and sustained emphasis on the remnant of Israel.
3. The majority of Jews living at the time of a special saving activity of God. In addition to the comments made above about this option, it has the added burden of explaining how "all" means "most."
4. All elect Israelites within ethnic Israel. I believe this is the strongest view, given the continual differentiation between Israel and the Gentiles in Romans 9-11, as well as the emphasis on the elect or the remnant within Israel. This interpretation still allows 'all' to mean every last one of a particular group, which in this case is all of the elect ethnic Israelites.
5. Both Jews and Gentiles who together constitute the church of Christ, the Israel of God. Lee Irons has an excellent paper arguing for this conclusion called "Paul's Theology of Israel's Future: A Non-Millennial Interpretation of Romans 11."⁹ But it is hard for me to get around the consistent emphasis throughout Romans 9-11 that differentiates between Gentiles and ethnic Israel. I could still buy Irons' argument if it weren't for the verses immediately after verse 26 that once again differentiate between the two groups:

As far as the gospel is concerned, **they** are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, **they** are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as **you** who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of **their** disobedience, so **they** too have now become disobedient in order that **they** too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to **you** (Romans 11:28-31).

Conclusion

If my method of arriving at theological truth was "counting the noses" of the great men who have held to a particular understanding of Scripture, then I would certainly believe that Romans 11 teaches about a future national redemptive event for Israel after all elect gentiles are saved. Some of the famous noses I would count would be those of

Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Herman Ridderbos, George E. Ladd, Geerhardus Vos, John Piper, Wayne Grudem, John Murray. The list could go on and on. Each of these amazing theologians dwarfs me in his knowledge of the Word, his natural abilities, and his industriousness. But after counting their noses and considering their learned opinions, I think that they all got it wrong. I know it sounds like *hubris*, but when I read their interpretation of Scripture and stack it up against my reading of Scripture, I am unpersuaded of their learned opinions. The fact that such an amazing group of Christian scholars has a different interpretation of Scripture than I do certainly gives me pause, and causes me to re-examine my point of view with a critical eye. But at the end of the day I cannot arrive at theological truth by counting noses. I can use the opinions of great men as a guide, but I must weigh their opinions and see if they persuade me or cause me to amend my own understanding of Scripture. I believe each theologian in my list above would agree with me that nose counting is no way to arrive at theological truth.

Romans 11 is a difficult passage. Hopefully, by reading how I have dealt with the context and the twists and turns in the argument has given you fuel for further study. I don't believe that Romans 11 teaches that there is a promise for a national future salvation for all of ethnic Israel. The thing Israel is guaranteed in this passage is that God's salvation is still available to any Jew who repents and believes. I know this interpretation is out of step with the way most interpreters understand Romans 11. But as I said, our theology cannot be based on counting noses, but on sticking our noses into Scripture and examining and weighing men's opinions against God's Word.

Endnotes:

¹ I argue this point in the final section of my article "Israel: A Nation of Unbelievers".

² Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Gordon D. Fee, Gen. Ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996, Page 683.

³ Acts 8:1-3, 9:1, 12:1-5, 17:5-9

⁴ You'll find this argument in the last section of the article "Israel: A Nation of Unbelievers".

⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2000), 179. I am indebted to Robertson for this whole line of thought. I highly recommend his book.

⁶ Two more examples of this are found in the following verses: Matthew 24:38 "For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to (*achris hou*) the day Noah entered the ark;" 1 Corinthians 15:25 "For he must reign until (*achris hou*) he has put all his enemies under his feet."

⁷ Romans 11:33-36

⁸ *Ibid.*, 183. Robertson laid out the general framework for me but I take the blame for the additional comments.

⁹ *The Reformation and Revival Journal* (Eschatology - Volume 6, Number 2 - Spring 1997).