



After nearly 1900 years, Israel was recognized as a nation again in 1948. Despite the opposition against her founding and repeated attacks by surrounding nations, she continues to prosper. Many consider Israel's existence to be "nothing short of miraculous."<sup>1</sup> The reality of her existence has sparked a flurry of discussion related to Israel's place in the redemptive plan of God. Many understand that the Jews have a place in the current plan of God and that God is presently saving a remnant. Some go further, arguing that in addition to saving a remnant now, a bright eschatological future lay ahead for national Israel. However, some believe Israel no longer has a place in the redemptive plan of God and that the church is the new spiritual Israel. N.T. Wright argues that "Israel," in the phrase "all Israel," (Rom 11:26) is to be "understood as a reference to the Church consisting of both Jewish and Gentile believers."<sup>2</sup> In such a view, the modern state of Israel possesses little or no significance at all.<sup>3</sup> And, in such a view, Israel as a national ethnic people has no future in the redemptive plan of God.

What is the identification of "all Israel" in Rom 11:26? Does this verse teach that God is done with Israel and that the church is the new Israel? Or

is it a reference to Israel's present or future role in the redemptive plan of God? This paper will argue that "all Israel" is a reference to ethnic, national Israel, who still possesses a place in the future redemptive plan of God.

### VIEWS OF "ALL ISRAEL" IN ROMANS 11:26

Today, there are three main views on the identification of "all Israel" in Rom 11:26.<sup>4</sup> The first view is that "all Israel" is a reference to the church, made up of believing Jews and Gentiles who are saved throughout all ages.<sup>5</sup> The second view is that "all Israel" is an elect remnant of Jews that are presently being saved.<sup>6</sup> The third view is that "all Israel" refers to an ethnic national Israel that will be saved at the end of the present age near Christ's return.<sup>7</sup>

#### "All Israel" as the Church

The first view is that Rom 11:26 refers to the saved Jews and Gentiles who comprise the church.<sup>8</sup> In this view, the church is "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16) in the present age. This is the view held by John Calvin and other Covenant theologians who see "more

<sup>1</sup> H. Wayne House, "The Future of National Israel," *BSac* 166 (2009), 463.

<sup>2</sup> Darrell L. Bock, Mitch Glaser, eds., *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel: A Biblical Theology of Israel and the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2014), loc 2591.

<sup>3</sup> House, "The Future of National Israel," 464.

<sup>4</sup> A fourth and obviously faulty view not discussed here is the universalistic conception that every Jew will be saved without exception.

<sup>5</sup> Matt Waymeyer, "The Dual Status of Israel in Romans 11:28," *TMSJ* 16 (2005), 58.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., footnote 3, notes that this is the view of John Calvin, John Owen, Lee Irons, O. Palmer Robertson, N. T. Wright, Philip E. Hughes, Ralph P. Martin, and Marten H. Woudstra.

continuity and unity between Old and New Testaments” than Dispensationalists.<sup>9</sup> This continuity drives them to see only one people of God, namely, the elect. As a result, the promises made to Abraham were made to the “church” of the Old Testament and thus God is not bound to ethnic Israel.<sup>10</sup>

This view of “all Israel” is defended by the greater context of Romans 9. In Romans 9, Paul explains “they are not all Israel” *spiritually* who “are descended from Israel” *physically* (vv. 6-13). In Paul’s theology, “there were true and false Jews” even though both the true and false were ethnically Jewish.<sup>11</sup> Simply being a physical descendant of Abraham does not make one part of God’s spiritually saved people, and Paul does use the term “son of Abraham” (Gal 3:7; referenced in Rom 4:16) to refer to believers. It is also possible that he uses the term “Jew” to refer to believers in Rom 2:28 (see also Esther 8:17 for converts “becoming Jews”), though it may be a stretch since ethnic Jews are the subject of the broader context of Rom 2:17-3:20. The “Israel of God” in Gal 6:16 is best understood as believing ethnic Jews as well.<sup>12</sup> The view of “all Israel” as the church is often supported by the olive tree analogy in the immediate previous context as well (11:17-24) where the saved remnant of Jews, along with the ingrafting of the Gentiles, are said to constitute the “Israel of God” that will be saved throughout all time.

While this view maintains substantive arguments, it fails to account for Paul’s consistent use of the term “Israel” to refer to ethnic Israelites throughout Romans 9-11, including that of v. 25. Therefore, for one verse, Paul must redefine “Israel” in v. 26 which is not likely. In the hope of aligning with an overall context of Romans 9-11, this view

glazes over the contextual question being asked by Paul in Romans 11 which pertains to ethnic Israel’s stumbling (vv. 11-32). It should also be noted that the olive tree analogy maintains a distinction between the mostly Gentile church (“you”) and Israel (“they” or “them”).

### “All Israel” as the Saved Remnant

A more attractive view is that “all Israel” refers to the elect ethnic Jewish remnant that trickles in throughout history.<sup>13</sup> These are those who within ethnic physical Israel are also spiritually saved Israel (Rom 9:6). Since God’s hardening judgment of Israel is partial (v. 25), this views “all Israel” as the remnant that is not hardened but believe and are saved. In this view, “And so all Israel will be saved” (καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται) is understood not as the future event, but as a current manner in which the entire Jewish remnant will be saved until the end of the Gentile age—that is “until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in” (v. 25).<sup>14</sup>

This view maintains strong contextual arguments. Paul is dogmatically clear that God is not finished with ethnic Israel (11:1, 11). He has by no means cast off Israel forever and is presently saving a remnant (11:1-6). For any Gentile to argue God has completely severed the Jews now or in the future “is profoundly mistaken.”<sup>15</sup> God is using His blessing on the Gentiles throughout the present age to provoke the Jews to jealousy and thus, salvation (11:14).

However, this view falls short for many reasons, two of which are presented here in brief. For one, this view misses the “more positive and optimistic” reading of the passage regarding the future of Israel’s rejuvenation (11:15), regrafting

<sup>9</sup> House, “The Future of National Israel,” 465.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 466.

<sup>11</sup> Larry D. Pettigrew, “The Curious Case of the Church Fathers and Israel,” in *Forsaking Israel: How It Happened and Why It Matters*, (ed. Larry D. Pettigrew; The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2020), 28.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2010), 128-129; 146-147, writes, “The true Jew is the Jew who has believed, much like the “Israel of God” of Gal. 6:16 refers to ethnic Jews who have trusted Christ by faith alone.”

<sup>13</sup> Waymeyer, “The Dual Status of Israel,” footnote 7, notes this is the view of Benjamin L. Merkle, Louis Berkhof, Robert L. Reymond, R. C. H. Lenski, Herman Ridderbos, Anthony A. Hoekema, and others.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (BECNT; 2d. ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 599.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 594.

(11:24), and God's faithfulness to Israel (11:26-32).<sup>16</sup> If God's preservation of a remnant is what Paul meant by the mystery revealed to him (11:25), it is in Schreiner's words, "stunningly anticlimactic."<sup>17</sup> Secondly, the Roman churches to whom Paul is writing already understood that a remnant of Jews were being saved. In Romans, Paul addresses issues between believing Gentiles and Jews. Therefore, something more must be intended by Paul.

### **"All Israel" as the Nation**

The third view is that "all Israel" refers to ethnic national Israel that will be saved at or near Christ's return.<sup>18</sup> This view is sequential in that it understands from v. 25 that the partial hardening of Israel will continue "until the fullness of the Gentiles has come." Thus, when the fullness of Gentiles comes in, the hardening of Israel will be removed and according to prophecy, "the ethnic nation as a whole will turn to Christ and be saved."<sup>19</sup> They will be regrafted (11:24) and rejuvenated (11:15) as God promised (11:26-31). This view understands the salvation of "all Israel" as a future, eschatological salvation event "rooted in the Lord's faithfulness to fulfill the covenantal promises He made" to the forefathers.<sup>20</sup>

### **"ALL ISRAEL" IN ROMANS 11:26**

It has been outlined that there are three main views on the interpretation of Romans 11:26 regarding the identification of "all Israel." This paper understands "all Israel" not to be the church or the ethnic Jewish remnant, but the elect nation of Israel that is saved in an eschatological event when "the fullness of the

Gentiles has come in" (v. 25). This view will be supported in the rest of the discussion.

### **The Consistent Use of the Term "Israel" in Romans 9-11**

Fundamental to the view that "all Israel" is a reference to ethnic Israel is Paul's consistent use of the term "Israel" to refer to ethnic Jews. Paul, a Jew himself (11:1), made it clear that he is speaking of his "fellow countrymen" (11:14) and "brethren according to the flesh" (9:3). Paul has used the term "Israel" 10 other times in Romans 9-11, all of which refer to ethnic Israel. This is clearly the meaning of the term "Israel" in v. 25b where Paul says Israel has been partially hardened. A shift from this ethnic denotation to a spiritual one in v. 26 is unnatural, especially when Paul clearly contrasts Gentiles with Israel in vv. 28-32. In v. 28, "they" (Israelites) are considered enemies for "your" (Gentile) sake, but "they" are also beloved for the sake of their fathers. Their "gifts and calling," Paul says, "are irrevocable," based on God's faithfulness to them. Paul is clearly talking about ethnic national Israel in the texts immediately preceding and following v. 26.

It is interesting to note that Paul did not use the term "Hebrew" or "Jew" in Romans 9-11. He used the term "Israel" because "Israel" is indisputably a national term, emphasizing the sons of Jacob and God's covenant with them. It presents the Jews as an elect people and not just as individuals. "They," Israel (11:28), will be saved "as a people."<sup>21</sup> God has chosen individuals (Rom 9), but He has also has a chosen nation (Rom 11) through which He reveals Himself to the world—including His covenant faithfulness to a disobedient people (11:28-32). In the LXX (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), upon which Paul may be drawing, "all Israel" can refer to "a large representation of Jewish

<sup>16</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 601.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 599.

<sup>18</sup> Waymeyer, "The Dual Status of Israel," footnote 11, notes this is the view of F. F. Bruce, Leon Morris, C. E. B. Cranfield, Douglas J. Moo, James G. D. Dunn, Thomas Schreiner, Robert L. Saucy, Donald K. Campbell, Jeffrey L. Townsend, Harold Hoener, and others.

<sup>19</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 599.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

people” or just “the Jewish people” in general. It is never used diachronically (the remnant-throughout-history view), but only synchronically, referring to the Jewish people at specific points in time.<sup>22</sup>

### The Partial Hardening

Paul has made it abundantly clear in Romans 11 that in the present age only a remnant of Israel is being saved. It is a “partial” ingathering. From man’s perspective, this presents a problem because God promised to save and restore, not reject, Israel (e.g., Zech 12-14). Thus, the salvation of only a remnant is the problem, not the solution.<sup>23</sup> While the remnant view lines up with Paul’s argument in Rom 9 and 11:1-10, it doesn’t line up with present argument Paul is making starting in 11:11 in that they have not “stumbled beyond recovery.” In other words, “something more than the salvation of the remnant awaits Israel.”<sup>24</sup> The preservation of the remnant points to something bigger and better for the future when the “partial” hardening is removed, and “all” Israel is saved. Paul speaks from the “remnant” (v. 5) to the “all” (v. 26), from the “partial” (v. 25) to “fullness” (v. 12), and from “failure” (v. 12) to “acceptance” (v. 15). Moo writes,

*[Paul’s] point seems to be that the present situation in salvation history, in which so few Jews are being saved, cannot finally do full justice to the scriptural expectations about Israel’s future. Something “more” is to be expected; and this “more,” Paul implies, is a large-scale conversion of Jewish people at the end of this age. The corporate significance of “all Israel” makes it impossible to reckon the actual percentage of Jews living at that time who will be saved. But the contrast between the*

*remnant and the “all Israel” would suggest a significantly larger percentage than was the case in Paul’s day.*<sup>25</sup>

It seems clear that Paul expects something more comprehensive regarding the salvation of Israel than what is happening at the present.<sup>26</sup> A fuller salvation awaits the Jewish people in a future event.

### The Temporary Hardening

That the present situation of Israel’s hardening is temporary is evidenced by the word “until” in v. 25. While some remnant theologians suggest that Paul is teaching that Israel’s hardening will continue “until” the last day, it most naturally means that the hardening will be reversed. Israel will be hardened “until” the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, suggesting a reversal of the present situation.

This reversal is expected throughout Paul’s argument. In v. 12, Paul speaks of Israel’s future “fulfillment” or “fullness.” In v. 15, Paul speaks of Israel’s future “acceptance” and “life from the dead,” implying a future rejuvenation of Israel. In the olive tree analogy, Paul ends “with the expectation that the severed branches will be grafted on again, suggesting a great number of Jews will turn back to faith in Christ.”<sup>27</sup> In vv. 28-32, God’s irrevocable gifts and calling to Israel leave them in a position to imminently receive mercy.<sup>28</sup>

Something else in v. 25, Paul speaks of a “mystery” that will prevent the Gentiles from becoming proud. The “mystery” cannot be that Jews and Gentiles would be saved, nor that a Jewish remnant is presently being saved. Again, a greater salvation of Israel was expected according to prophecy (Zech 12-14). Therefore, Moo understands the mystery is that before “all Israel” will be saved,

<sup>22</sup> Bock, *The People, the Land, and the Future of Israel*, loc. 2643-2652.

<sup>23</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 599.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 724.

<sup>26</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, “Israelology: Part 4 of 6,” *CTSJ* 6 (2000), 58-59, makes a helpful point in that while there is a current remnant being saved and this cannot be all that Paul means, the future “all Israel” will also be a faithful remnant according to prophecy. A distinction should be made between the present remnant and the future, more comprehensive remnant of Israel.

<sup>27</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 600.

<sup>28</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 735, best understands “now” (v. 31) an expression of imminence. Israel is now in a position to experience God’s mercy “at any time.”

there will be a time of extended ingathering from the Gentiles. The mystery is not so much the manner in which Israel is saved, but the sequence. Moo comments,

*What stands out in vv. 25b-26a, what Paul has not yet explicitly taught, and what entails a reversal in current Jewish belief, is the sequence by which “all Israel” will be saved: Israel hardened until the Gentiles come in and in this way all Israel being saved. Some OT and Jewish texts predict that Gentiles will join the worship of the Lord in the last days; and some of them suggest that it is the Lord’s glory revealed in a rejuvenated and regathered Israel that will stimulate the Gentiles’ interest. But wholly novel was the idea that the inauguration of the eschatological age would involve setting aside the majority of Jews while Gentiles streamed in to enjoy the blessings of salvation and that only when that stream had been exhausted would Israel as a whole experience these blessings.*<sup>29</sup>

This means that while *kai houtos* (“and so” or “in this way”) usually refers to “manner” and does not usually carry a “temporal” meaning, it may have a temporal reference. The temporal reference is the time frame in which Israel would be saved which is after the fullness of Gentiles comes in.

This mystery is supported by the prophetic texts Paul cites from Isaiah in vv. 26-27 that support Israel’s future salvation. These verses speak of Messiah’s coming and His forgiveness of Israel’s sins according to His covenant with them. In the words of S. Lewis Johnson, “Both divine logic (cf. vv. 11-24) and prophecy (vv. 25-27) look to a restoration of Israel.”<sup>30</sup>

Two questions must be kept in mind when reading this passage: 1) Is God done with Israel (11:11)? And 2) What will happen to Israel in the

future?<sup>31</sup> The answer is found throughout the Scriptures. Old Testament prophets predict a national regathering and repentance (Zech 12:10). Jesus and the apostles expect national repentance of Israel before the Second Coming (Matt 23:39; Acts 3:19-21). And Romans 11 is teaching the exact same thing in future tense: “Israel will be saved, the deliverer will come, and he will turn ungodliness [i.e. unbelief] away from Jacob.”<sup>32</sup> Thus, as Vlach states, “the first aspect of God’s faithfulness involves the keeping of remnant, the second involves the eschatological salvation of all Israel.”<sup>33</sup>

### The Hortatory Purpose of Romans 11:11-32

The idea that “all Israel” refers to ethnic national Israel is supported by the hortatory purpose of Romans 11:11-32.<sup>34</sup> In Romans 11:11-32, Paul is making the case that God is not finished with the nation of Israel and that their expected future is imminently pending. This reality should stall any Gentile pride towards ethnic Jews (vv. 20; 25). This intent must not be missed. Moo argues,

*In both Galatians and Rom. 4 Paul is arguing that Gentiles, as Gentiles, can become recipients of the blessings promised to Abraham and full members of the people of God. Paul’s application to Gentiles of the OT people-of-God language is perfectly appropriate in such contexts. But Paul’s purpose in Rom. 11 is almost the opposite. Here, he counters a tendency for Gentiles to appropriate for themselves exclusively the rights and titles of “God’s people.” For Paul in this context to call the church “Israel” would be fuel to the fire of the Gentiles’ arrogance by giving them grounds to brag that “we are the true Israel.”*<sup>35</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 716-717.

<sup>30</sup> S. Lewis Johnson, *Discovering Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 187.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Davies, “In This Way, All Israel Will Be Saved,” in *Forsaking Israel: How It Happened and Why It Matters* (ed. Larry D. Pettigrew; The Woodlands, TX: Kress, 2020), 335.

<sup>32</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 604.

<sup>33</sup> Vlach, *Has the Church Replaced Israel?*, 161.

<sup>34</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 721.

<sup>35</sup> Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 721.

As Moo pointed out, a dominant theme in the NT is the argument for the Gentiles to be accepted *as Gentiles*. Paul (and other nascent church leaders) spends a great bulk of his time arguing for Gentile acceptance. However, that is not the case in Romans. In Romans, he is defending the special place Israel has in the redemptive plan of God (Rom 9:1-5; “to the Jew first,” Rom 1:16). The Roman Gentile Christians in Paul’s audience know they have been accepted and are in danger of becoming arrogant toward their Jewish brethren—a very different spirit than Paul’s towards the Jews (Rom 9:3). Gentile pride is the main concern.<sup>36</sup>

While believing Gentiles may be considered “sons of Abraham” or the chosen people of God, “Nowhere, however, does this mean Israel is now dissolved. In fact, Paul warns against this very thing that non-dispensationalist systems approve in nullifying Israel’s future.”<sup>37</sup> Rather than seeing “all Israel” as the church, v. 26 is Paul’s climactic argument that the church has not replaced Israel and the church is not Israel. Israel as a chosen nation still possesses a bright eschatological future according to God’s faithfulness. The gifts and calling of God with Israel are irrevocable (Rom 11:29). They are still beloved for the sake of their forefathers (Rom 11:28).

## CONCLUSION

The identification of “all Israel” in Romans 11:26 is best viewed as ethnic, national Israel. Israel still holds a prominent place in the redemptive plan of God. Throughout Romans 9-11, Paul consistently uses the term “Israel” to denote ethnic, national Israel as a chosen covenant people of God. While unnatural and unpredictable, Israel is currently experiencing a partial divine hardening. However, the mystery is that after the full number of Gentiles comes in, this hardening is to be reversed and a fuller, comprehensive salvation of “all Israel” will take place at the end of the present age. According to prophetic Scriptures, a future national Israel will

repent and turn to Christ, resulting in their acceptance and forgiveness. This event will teach the nations about God’s sovereignty and covenant faithfulness (Ezek 36:22-23). Such a work of God should effectively remove any Gentile arrogance against the Jews whose root supports them. How much more natural it will be for Israelite branches to be grafted into their own tree! However this will not occur, “until [they, Israel] say, ‘Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (Matt 23:39).

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<sup>36</sup> Schreiner, *Romans*, 593.

<sup>37</sup> Davies, *Forsaking Israel*, 338.

