

## THE MEANING OF THE PHRASE "AND THUS ALL ISRAEL WILL BE SAVED" (ROMANS 11:26)

Charles M. Home\*

This phrase is found in a distinct but by no means parenthetical portion of Paul's epistle to the Romans, chapters nine through eleven.<sup>1</sup> The section addresses itself to what may be appropriately termed the Jewish problem, a problem that is clearly expressed in the question of Rom 11:1—"I say, then: God has not rejected his people, has he?" The emphatic negative answer to this question rests on several arguments, the principal one being the necessity for a correct understanding of who it is that constitute God's people. Gregory Baum states:

The reason why Paul spends almost the whole of chapter 9 of Romans on the schisms in Israel is that he wishes to demonstrate the fidelity of God in spite of the incredulity of so many Jews. In this situation God is not going back on his word, since from the beginning the messianic promises were destined only for the men of God's free choice. Not all those who were of Jewish stock were truly Israelites, that is, men of promise.<sup>2</sup>

Paul makes a necessary distinction between "Israel of the flesh" and "Israel of the spirit." Spiritual Israel consists of the elect within ethnic Israel, and in the context of Romans nine through eleven these elect are equivalent to the remnant. If then we are to understand how it is that God has not forsaken his people we must first know who it is that constitute that people. On this point Paul teaches us that God's people of promise are the elect of ethnic Israel, "for they are not all of Israel who are descended from Israel" (9:6).<sup>3</sup> It is impossible to stress too much that over all of Romans 9-11 stands this statement.

Johannes Munck properly observes in this regard that

Paul does not here visualize "Israelites" who do not belong to the physical Israel as being within the new Israel of the Church. . . . Here in 9:6-13 the only point he makes is that claims cannot be made on the basis of physical descent, since descendants of the patriarchs with exactly the same claims were allotted different destinies.<sup>4</sup>

In chap. 10 Paul marshals further arguments to indicate that God has not re-

\*Charles Home is associate professor of theology at Wheaton College Graduate School.

<sup>1</sup>That this section of the epistle is no mere incidental afterthought of Paul can be established from the fact that in chapters one through four the apostle has carefully differentiated between Jews and Gentiles. This differentiation demands the kind of further explanation found in chapters nine through eleven.

<sup>2</sup>G. Baum, *Is the New Testament Anti-Semitic?* (Glen Rock, N. J.: Paulist, 1965) 294.

<sup>3</sup>G. Baum's comment here may also be noted. "It is moreover altogether obvious that in Rom. 9:6-13 the opposition of the two groups symbolized by Isaac-Ishmael and Jacob-Esau refers to the schism *within* Israel provoked by the preaching of the Gospel. The question of the Gentiles does not enter Paul's view at all at this point." *Ibid.*, p. 297. Paul does not include Gentile Christians in his reflections until 9:22 ff.

<sup>4</sup>J. Munck, *Christ and Israel: An Interpretation of Romans 9-11* (Philadelphia: Fortress) 36.

neged on his promise to his people. In 10:1 he cites himself as evidence. John Murray indicates that there are two views of the apostle's appeal to his identity as a Jew:

One is that, since he is of Israel, his acceptance of God affords proof that God had not completely abandoned Israel. The appeal to his own salvation would be of marked relevance because of his previous adamant opposition to the gospel (cf. Gal. 1:13, 14; I Tim. 1:13-15) . . . . The other view is that the appeal to his own identity is the reason given for the *vehemence* of his negative reply "God forbid" and, therefore, the reason why he recoils from the suggestion that God had cast off his people. His own kinship with Israel, his Israelitish identity constrains the reaction, "may it not be" . . . . Both views are tenable and there does not appear to be enough evidence to decide for one against the other.<sup>5</sup>

In verse two the apostle argues from the importance of God's sovereign election<sup>6</sup> and from the historical record of Elijah (11:2-4). The import of the latter argument is simply that the salvation of a small remnant from the total mass is ample proof that God's true people have not been, are not now, nor will be cast off. Such a thought is utterly incompatible with God's electing love (11:5-6). Although Israel as a whole had been disobedient, yet a remnant was left and therefore God had quite evidently not forsaken his people. Israel's rejection was *not complete*. In vv 11 and following we discover that the rejection is *not final*. Both of these considerations—not total but partial, not final but temporary—support the proposition that God had not cast off his people; his purpose regarding spiritual Israel (Israel of the promise) is yet to be fulfilled. In the present their stumbling has meant salvation for the Gentiles (11:11). And yet even as Paul ministers as the apostle to the Gentiles he is deeply desirous that his fellow countrymen may out of jealousy be brought to the same Lord (11:13-14).

Verses 16-24 provide us with two figures: The first is simply stated (the first piece of dough and the lump), the second is developed in some detail (the olive tree with natural and wild branches). This entire section has crucial importance in any attempt to construct a Biblical concept of the people of God. Through my own study of this passage I have come to have an incidental semantic quarrel with traditional covenant theology and an essential substantive quarrel with dispensationalism. As respects the former I would suggest that it is inappropriate to speak of the "Church" in the OT; it seems to me that such an appellation for the people of God in that period of history has only the slenderest exegetical support. The people of God in the period of the OT are properly called "Israel," whereas only since Pentecost may this *one* people be called the "Church."

My quarrel with my dispensationalist friends, however, is much more substantive and crucial. Charles Ryrie asserts that the essence of this system is found in the fact that "a dispensationalist keeps Israel and the Church distinct," qualified in a footnote because of my criticism of the work in MS form to read "*throughout* God's program."<sup>7</sup> Unless I misread this, we have then two peoples of God. But Rom 11:16-25 will permit of only *one* people of God, not two! Peter Richard-

<sup>5</sup>J. Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 2. 65-66.

<sup>6</sup>On the meaning of the word "foreknew" see C. M. Horne, *Salvation* (Chicago: Moody, 1971) 20.

<sup>7</sup>C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 44, 46.

son in his published doctoral dissertation states that this figure clearly indicates that "the Church has no existence apart from Israel and has no separate identity."<sup>8</sup>

The Lutheran scholar Anders Nygren states most lucidly the ecclesiological import of this passage:

This illustration has special interest because it makes clear Paul's view of the relation between Israel and the Christian church. . . . Israel is the tree; Israel is God's people. Into this people are introduced and ingrafted the Gentiles who come to faith in Christ and are saved. Salvation consists in the very fact that they are thus ingrafted. It is not their faith that sustains the people of God, but the people of God that sustains them. According to Paul, the Christian church has its roots in the Old Testament, in God's choice of the fathers. . . . Christians are not a new race; they are rather the continuation, the legitimate continuation, of God's Old Testament people.<sup>9</sup>

Dispensational ecclesiology destroys this basic continuity between the people of God in all ages. Against this backdrop of the essential oneness of the people of God, we now focus our attention on the announced topic of this paper. We shall examine two questions: (1) Whom does Paul mean by "all Israel," and when will this be realized? (2) What is the nature of this salvation?

Whom does Paul mean by "all Israel"? There are three major answers given to this question.

1. The Church—referred to as the new spiritual Israel comprised of both Gentiles and Jews. This view is adopted by a number of Reformed theologians, a foremost representative being John Calvin. He writes:

I extend the word *Israel* to include all the people of God, in this sense, "When the Gentiles have come in, the Jews will at the same time return from their defection to the obedience of faith. The salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be drawn from both, will thus be completed, and yet in such a way that the Jews, as the first born in the family of God, may obtain the first place."<sup>10</sup>

Calvin then appeals to Gal 6:16—"the Israel of God"—in support of his interpretation.<sup>11</sup> Others concurring in this position would include Luther, Augustine, Archer and Barth.

The problem with this position is that, as F. F. Bruce states, "it is impossible to entertain an exegesis which takes 'Israel' here in a different sense from 'Israel' in v 25 ('blindness in part is happened to Israel')." <sup>12</sup> The context will not support the view that Israel means the Church. If it is argued that the phrase "and then

<sup>8</sup>P. Richardson, *Israel in the Apostolic Church* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969) 130.

<sup>9</sup>A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1949) 399-400.

<sup>10</sup>J. Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961) 255.

<sup>11</sup>It is the opinion of this writer that "the Israel of God" must mean ethnic Jews whether as already converted or as those yet to be. It would appear not to be a synonym for the Church. See P. Richardson, *Israel*, pp. 74-84.

<sup>12</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 221-222.

all Israel shall be saved" should be rendered "and so all Israel shall be saved"—meaning that the ingathering of the full number of Gentiles is in itself the salvation of all Israel—then it should be noted that a well-attested use of the Greek *houtōs*, "so," "thus," is that of a temporal sense.<sup>13</sup>

Actually, the context demands that we understand Israel to mean ethnic Israel. This is seen first when we consider what is meant by "their fulness" (v 12). Second, it is required when we note the subject of "if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in" (v 23). Third, it is supported by the parallel instituted between the Jews and the Gentiles in vv 30-33. Fourth, it is evident from the phrase "that he might show mercy to all" (v 32).

Finally, in Romans 9-11 the term "Israel" indisputably refers to ethnic Israel in each of its occurrences, the only possible exception being 11:26. What compelling reason can there be, therefore, to accept another meaning here?<sup>14</sup>

2. The nation. This view maintains that Israel means the Jewish people as a whole, the ethnic unit, Israel as a nation. Plummer expresses his preference for this position, indicating that "all Israel" means "the mass of the Jewish nation . . . It simply designates the great body of Jacob's descendants, who shall be living when the Jews shall turn to the Lord and accept their Messiah."<sup>15</sup> Concurring in this view are both dispensationalists and nondispensationalists, premillennialists, amillennialists and postmillennialists. Among those adopting this position are Pentecost, Hoyt, Johnson, Murray, Hodge, Liddon, Godet, Plummer, Brown, Denney and Wilson.

All these interpreters, however much they may differ in their eschatological positions, agree that the term "all Israel" refers to ethnic Jews, not Gentiles.

Some link this interpretation of Rom. 11:26a with their conception of God's entire program for the future of the Jews: their return to the land of the fathers, their exaltation to a place of political prominence, and their significance for the evangelization of the human race. According to these dispensationalistic interpreters the Jews not only will be saved but will become the saviors of the world. They will be the channel through which the gospel of grace reaches the world in the age of ingathering.

But others are far more conservative in their interpretation of Rom. 11:26a, and confine their theory to the belief that the great mass or body of the Jews will be converted after the evangelization of the Gentile world and just before or in connection with the second coming of the Lord.<sup>16</sup>

One of the questions that must be asked of this view is whether the disparity between ethnic Israel and the nation of Israel has been seriously reckoned with. Will *all* Jews be a part of the nation of Israel at the fulfillment of this passage? If so, on what grounds is this argued? If not, what of the (at least) seeming arbitrariness of God's saving only those in the state of Israel?

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>The specific references are: (1) 9:3-5; (2) 9:6; (3) 9:30-31; (4) 10:19; (5) 10:21; (6) 11:1; (7) 11:7; (8) 11:25.

<sup>15</sup>W. S. Plummer, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1971) 553.

<sup>16</sup>W. Hendriksen, *Israel in Prophecy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968) 44.

A further basic issue in this position is whether Scripture truly promises a future restoration to the Jewish *nation*. This is obviously a much bigger question than we can address ourselves to in this paper, but it will have to be seriously and carefully worked through if we are to ultimately feel sure of our interpretation of this passage in its larger Biblical context.

Finally, most of those who adopt the theory under discussion connect this mass salvation of the nation with the second coming of Christ, but the immediately following context connects it with the *first* coming and its effects in the *present* age. "Paul is speaking throughout these chapters of that which is *now* (in his own day) going on and will continue to take place throughout this dispensation until 'all Israel' shall have been gathered in."<sup>17</sup> One should note the emphasis on the *present* in chap. 11—vv 1, 5, 14, 31.

3. The elect of ethnic Israel. This view maintains that Paul is writing of the elect of ethnic Israel who are even now being saved. Hendriksen is representative of this position:

It is evident . . . that the salvation of "all Israel" was being progressively realized in Paul's own day and age, and that it will continue to be progressively realized until "all Israel" shall have been saved. When the full number of elect Gentiles will have been gathered in, then the full number of elect Jews will also have been gathered in.<sup>18</sup>

If Paul is speaking in 11:26 of a future mass conversion of the nation of Israel, then he is destroying the entire development of his argument in chaps. 9-11. For the one important point that he is trying to establish constantly is exactly this: that God's promises attain fulfillment not in the nation as such (that is, all of ethnic Israel) but rather in the remnant according to the election of grace. It would seem from this fact therefore that the widely-held theory that the term "all Israel" refers to the nation as a whole is incorrect—though the correct element in this view is that Israel refers to Jews.

G. C. Berkouwer is another exponent of this third view. He maintains that "all Israel will be saved" points not to an apocalyptic mystery of the "end-time," but to a living expectation in our own lifetime. The reference is to the elect of ethnic Israel being saved, not to spiritual Israel (including Gentiles and Jews) being saved, nor to national Israel becoming saved at some future moment.

Berkouwer states:

From our perspective, centuries after Paul, there is a danger of looking at his concern for Israel as the unveiling of a chiliastic secret, and seeing it as some kind of apocalyptic schema or narrative. Such an interpretation raises a peculiar dilemma; either the last generation (as "all Israel") shall return or Paul was mistaken. This position, however, ignores the extent of which Paul, convinced by the evidence of salvation among the Gentiles, concentrated his attention on the *maximum* possibilities *in his own time*. . . . This expectation is not that of apocalyptic, but something that generates tremendous apostolic activity.<sup>19</sup>

Though this view is not without its problems, it would seem to this writer to

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>19</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, *The Return of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 349.

be more in line with Paul's argument throughout chaps. 9-11 than the other alternatives. I would state therefore in summary that when Paul states that "all Israel shall be saved" he means to refer to the full number of elect Jews whom it pleases God to bring into his kingdom throughout the ages until the very day when the full number of the Gentiles also shall have been brought in. In keeping with the context, "all Israel" means "the remnant according to the election of grace" (11:5), not the nation in its entirety.

In Elijah's day there was a remnant. In Paul's day there was a remnant. In the years to come there would be a remnant. These remnants of all the ages taken together constitute "all Israel." So also "the fulness" of the Gentiles indicates the total number of Gentiles that are saved.<sup>20</sup>

What is the nature of this salvation? According to 11:26-27 this salvation of which Paul writes is equivalent to the forgiveness of sins through the mercy of God. In nature it is essentially spiritual rather than material, eternal rather than temporal. It is the saving rule of God in Christ inaugurated at the first advent and yet to be consummated at the *parousia*. It is a salvation that promises the complete redemption of all the elect from among both the Gentile and Jewish worlds. It may well be a weakness in Berkouwer's discussion of this passage that although he is basically correct in his interpretation of the phrase "all Israel shall be saved," he does not sufficiently develop its eschatological implications.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup>W. Hendriksen, *Israel*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>21</sup>H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 359 n. 71.