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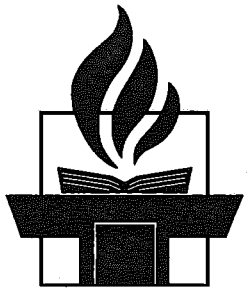

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Paul's Theology of Israel's Future: A Nonmillennial Interpretation of Romans 11

Lee Irons

The interpretation of Romans 11 is, of course, a highly controversial subject. Two of the major millennial positions—premillennialism and postmillennialism—go to this text, among others, to find biblical justification for their respective eschatologies. Although they differ as to the timing and character of the glorious, external, earthly phase of Christ's kingdom, both the premillennial and postmillennial form of chiliasm agree that Romans 11 holds out the hope of a mass conversion of Jews and Gentiles during a long era of righteousness and peace upon the earth. Amillennialists, however, neither expect such a hope nor find it in Romans 11. They—and I include myself among them—take the view that this text does not promise such a massive eschatological harvest of Jews and Gentiles. O. Palmer Robertson, in his important paper "Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?", says,

> The eye of man cannot tell whether this number is few or many. But the eye of faith is confident that the "full number" is being realized. For this reason, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to posit some future date in which the "remnant" principle will be superseded by a newly-introduced "fulness" principle.[1]

This is what I am calling the nonmillennial interpretation of Romans 11. I call it nonmillennial rather than amillennial (though it is certainly that) in order to accent the fact that this interpretation sees neither pre- nor postmillennialism in this passage. Paul does not address the millennial question. The question is not even remotely in the background of his thought (though the passage may contain teaching

that would logically imply an answer to that question). Thus, I have called my paper a nonmillennial interpretation of Romans 11.

But this is not to say that my paper is going to be an exclusively negative attack on views I regard as being unbiblical. On the contrary, I have a positive thesis to offer, as well as what I believe to be compelling arguments in its support. My thesis is that the reference in verse 26 to "all Israel" should be interpreted as a Pauline redefinition of the concept "Israel" in light of the great mystery that has been revealed in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. According to this view, Paul's statements in this passage regarding Israel are not prophetic in the usual sense of the term. Romans 11 is not a prewritten history of endtimes events. Admittedly, Paul does raise the question of Israel's future, as one can readily see in verse 1: "Has God rejected His people?" However, the question is not answered by a futuristic prediction of what is yet to occur but by a redemptive-historical reinterpretation of what Israel itself *is* in the present. Surprising as it may at first appear, I believe that a careful exegesis of the Greek words and syntax of verses 25-26 leads objectively to the conclusion that Paul has literally redefined the term "Israel" to refer to the New Testament church by arguing that God's irrevocable promises to Israel are fulfilled by means of the salvation of both Jew and Gentile in the church age.

If the time constraint inherent in this forum were eliminated, it would be possible to examine the entire text of Romans 11 carefully, verse by verse. However, I must limit myself to what I regard as the key question for unlocking the correct interpretation of Romans 11 — namely, the question of what is meant by "and thus all Israel will be saved." A few unanswered questions regarding other portions of Romans 11 will remain (e.g., the interpretation of vv. 12 and 15)—questions I have attempted to answer at

length in a larger paper. However, I have included an appendix at the end of this paper to tie up these loose ends as briefly as possible.

Three principal options for the meaning of "all Israel" in verse 26 have been proposed in the history of interpretation.

The first is that advocated in this paper—that "all Israel" refers to the entire people of God, Jew and Gentile alike. John Calvin, in his comments on Romans 11:26, ably summarizes the view maintained here:

> *And so all Israel, etc.* Many understand this of the Jewish people, as though Paul had said, that religion would again be restored among them as before: but I extend the word Israel to all the people of God, according to this meaning—"When the Gentiles shall come in, the Jews also shall return from their defection to the obedience of faith; and thus shall be completed the salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be gathered from both . . . ." The same manner of speaking we find in Gal. vi.16. The Israel of God is what he calls the Church, gathered alike from Jews and Gentiles.[2]

This paper will seek to present further exegetical and theological evidence to provide further corroboration of Calvin's instincts.

The second option is that taken by a majority of commentators and interpreters and is found in all three millennial camps. James D. G. Dunn is a good representative of this view. He states that "there is now a strong consensus that *pas Israel* ['all Israel'] must mean Israel as a whole, as a people whose corporate identity and wholeness would not be lost even if in the event there were some (or indeed many) individual exceptions."3 This interpretation is obviously congenial to both pre- and postmillennialism, but it is also accepted by that breed of amillennialism (typified by

John Murray) which anticipates a mass revival of the majority of Israelites alive just prior to the return of Christ.

The third option is that taken by the other breed of amillennialist (as typified by Herman Ridderbos, O. Palmer Robertson, Anthony Hoekema and Robert Strimple). This position argues that "all Israel" has reference to "all of the elect within the community of Israel" (Robertson, 226). Thus, the statement that "all Israel shall be saved" means that throughout the church age all elect Jews will come to Christ and be saved.

Although I take issue with both the second and the third positions, my paper is structured primarily as a response to the third option. Many of my arguments will be aimed at Robertson in particular, as he has written the most detailed defense of that position.

Just as an aside. If you have been processing what I have said so far, it is becoming clear that there are actually three breeds of amillennialists: (1) Those who, like Calvin and myself, see "all Israel" as a reference to the church. (2) Those amillennialists who, like John Murray, interpret Romans 11 as a postmillennialist would, regarding the future conversion of the Jews *en masse*, but without espousing the postmillennial hermeneutic as whole. (3) And those who, like Robertson, see "all Israel" as having an ethnically restrictive denotation (i.e., to all the elect within the community of Israel) and who envision their salvation as a continual process throughout the interadvental period.

I mention this simply to avoid confusion.

Now, don't misunderstand my attack on the third camp as an attack on every aspect of their position. In fact, my paper is heavily dependent on Robertson's answer to the premillennial interpretation of this passage. Robertson cogently, and I think correctly, argues that throughout the interadvental period both Jews and Gentiles will flock into the kingdom of God by putting their faith in Jesus Christ. In

the end, the two *pleromata* (fulnesses), that of the Gentiles and that of the Jews, will be completed by means of the gradual addition of elect Jews and Gentiles to the one olive tree of the covenant of grace. A mass conversion of the last generation of Jews alive just prior to the return of Christ is not to be expected. Rather, the entire passage focuses on God's present dealings with ethnic Israel.

Before developing the exegesis of my distinctive thesis, it would be well to examine briefly Robertson's argument for an exclusively present concern in this chapter. While rejecting his interpretation of "all Israel" I believe that Robertson adduces compelling evidence that suggests that Romans 11 is misconstrued at a fundamental level if it is read as a predictive prophecy concerned with endtimes events. He provides four arguments indicating that the scope of Paul's concerns is *present* rather than future:

1) The first clue is found in verse 1: "I say then, God has not rejected His people, has He? May it never be! For I too am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." Note well how Paul answers his own question, "God has not rejected His people, has He?" He does not answer, "May it never be! For do you not know that in the Millennium God will restore Israel to her former glory?" But this is not what the text says. Robertson comments: "In answer to the question, 'Has God cast off his people?' Paul identifies himself as current proof that God's purposes for Israel are being realized in the present era. . ." (p. 210). Paul is an Israelite, and Paul is saved. Therefore, he reasons, it cannot be the case that God has entirely rejected Israel.

2) The second piece of evidence that Romans 11 focuses on God's present intentions for Israel is found in verse 5: "In the same way then, there has also come to be *at the present time* a remnant according to God's gracious choice." Notice particularly the phrase "at the present time" (*en to nun kairo*). "These two references [vv. 1 and 5] orient this first

paragraph of Romans 11 (vv 1-10) to the question of God's dealing with Israel in the present hour" (p. 211).

3) But this concern with Israel's present salvation continues into the next section, which provides the third clue. Verses 13 and 14 read: "But I am speaking to you who are Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle of Gentiles, I magnify my ministry, if somehow I might move to jealousy my fellow countrymen and save some of them." Is it not clear that Paul's fervent aspiration is that by his present ministry among the Gentiles he might see the salvation of his kinsmen according to the flesh? "By his current ministry he expects to see Jews moved to jealousy when they see Gentile believers sharing in the blessings of the messianic kingdom" (Robertson, 211).

4) Fourth, the concluding paragraph (vv. 30-32) reiterates the fact that the entire chapter is oriented not toward a future hope but toward a present expectation.

> For just as you once were disobedient to God, but *now* have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also *now* have been disobedient, in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may *now* be shown mercy. For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all.

"The threefold 'now' . . . of these concluding verses indicates that Paul's emphasis on the present responsiveness of Israel continues to be his central concern" (Robertson, 212).

Thus, we have four pieces of evidence, distributed pervasively throughout the entire chapter, from its initial statement in verse 1 to its concluding finale in verse 32, which, taken together have the cumulative effect of demonstrating that Romans 11 is not concerned with a predictive prophecy regarding Israel's future as such but with something

entirely different. The reception or acceptance of Israel mentioned in verse 15, or their ingrafting (as it is called in vv. 17-24), is not a future eschatological hope but an imminently anticipated consequence of Paul's present evangelistic efforts among the Gentiles.

Now, of course, it is *possible* that Paul has *both* questions in mind: What is Israel's present status? And what is her future hope? Whatever else Paul may have had in mind, a prima facie reading of verses 25-26 might lead one to think that *here* at least Paul makes a prophetic utterance regarding Israel's future. Premillennialists like to say that, in fact, these verses provide us with a clear, literal, apostolic prediction of Israel's future restoration. "What more could you ask for?" they ask.

It is on these verses then that we will focus our attention for the rest of this paper. Let me begin by citing them:

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

The key question that I wish to address is the meaning of "all Israel" in verse 26. As I have already stated, I contend that "all Israel" refers not merely to all the elect of the nation Israel but to all the elect from both the Jews and the Gentiles. If this thesis is correct, I believe we will have a better grasp both of the apostle's eschatology and of his hermeneutic. Most importantly, we will see the radical nature of his Christologically-transformed definition of Israel. And this in turn will confirm that Paul's concerns, even in verses 25-26, are present and theological rather than future and prophetic.

There are five lines of reasoning supportive of my view that "all Israel" refers to the church.

"Israel" Can Be Used in Different Senses

It is commonly asserted that the word "Israel" must have the same force and reference that it has in all eleven occurrences in Romans 9-11. For example, Cranfield writes, "It is not feasible to understand *Israel* in v. 26 in a different sense from that which it has in v. 25, especially in view of the sustained contrast between Israel and the Gentiles throughout vv. 11-32. That *pas Israel* here does not include Gentiles is virtually certain."[4] But this is an assertion without proof. Why can't the same word be used with more than one nuance? Robertson says,

> The fact that the term Israel is used in two different senses in two consecutive verses should not be disturbing. When Paul says in Rom. 9:6 that "they are not all Israel that are of Israel," he undoubtedly is using the term Israel in two different ways within the scope of a single phrase (p. 226 n. 9).

A prima facie case for my position can be made by simply noting that we should not be too hasty in assuming that "Israel" must have the same meaning in verse 26 that it has in verse 25 for the simple reason that in verse 26 we have "all Israel" whereas in verse 25 we have "Israel" without modification. A similar use of "all" to expand the referent of a term originally limited to ethnic Israel may be found in Romans 4:13 and 16. We read as follows:

> For the promise made to Abraham or *his descendants* that he would be heir of the world was not [fulfilled] through Law, but through the righteousness of faith. . . . For this reason, it is by faith, that it may be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all.

Most commentators agree that "those who are of the Law" refers to Jewish Christians, while "those who are of the faith of Abraham" refers to Gentile Christians. Thus Paul is arguing that the promise originally made to Abraham and his genetic seed was based on the principle of justification by faith so that the Gentiles could be included as well. When he wants to refer to the genetic seed of Abraham, he uses the simple "his seed," but when he wants to expand the reference to include the true spiritual offspring of Abraham, he uses "all the seed." If such a technique was employed earlier in Romans, why not here in chapter 11?

In fact, this is quite likely, since in verse 32 "all" is employed again with an ethnically universal connotation, as occurs so often in Paul's epistles: "For God has bound *all* over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on *all*." It should be unnecessary to point out that "all" here cannot be taken to refer to all men without exception, for this would spell rank universalism. And indeed, the immediately preceding verses expound the content of "all" for us: "Just as you were once disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience, so these also have now been disobedient in order that because of the mercy shown to you they also may now be shown mercy" (vv. 30-31). Dunn comments on verse 32 thus:

> The *pas* ["all"], so insistent a feature of Paul's expression of the gospel (see particularly 1:5, 16, 18; 2:9-10; 3:9, 19-20, 22-23; 4:11, 16; 5:12, 18; 10:4, 11-13) now provides a fitting element in the final concluding statement: the "all" includes both parties in the preceding verses (you Gentiles, and Israel).[5]

Not only verse 32 but an earlier reference to the ethnically universal sin of man and the equally universal scope of the Gospel adds credibility to taking "all Israel" as inclusive of Jews and Gentiles:

> What then? Are we any better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are *all* under sin. . . . But now apart from the Law the righteousness from God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for *all* those who believe; for there is no distinction [cf. Rom. 10:12]; for *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:9, 21-23).

My point is not simply that whenever we read the word "all" in Romans we must think "both Jews and Gentiles." Nevertheless, it is true that "all" regularly carries this connotation in contexts dealing with the relationship of Jew and Gentile in the Gospel. That "all" probably carries this connotation in Romans 11:26 can be demonstrated from two considerations: the context addresses the Jew-Gentile issue, and "all" is unquestionably used with this meaning a mere six verses later in a verse that clearly serves as a concluding summary (v. 32).

The Decisive Import of Verse 25

So far, I have shown that my thesis is plausible at best, but I have yet to adduce decisive argumentation demonstrating that it is correct. Consider, therefore, the language of 11:25 as a whole: "For I do not want you, brethren, to be uninformed of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation, that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in." Is it merely incidental that Paul identifies the *terminus ad quem* of

Israel's partial hardening as the point when "the full number of the Gentiles has come in"? On the view advocated by Ridderbos and Robertson, Paul could just as well have said, "a partial hardening has happened to Israel for the entire interadvental period, and in this way all Israel will be saved." But it seems that the very mention of "the fulness of the Gentiles" indicates that it bears some relevance to the manner in which "all Israel" is to be saved. Or are we to imagine that *houtos* has reference exclusively to the "partial hardening" (if the hardening is partial, then some are not hardened but believe and are saved)? If that were the case, why did Paul even bother to mention that the partial hardening would have a terminus at all, much less that the terminus would be coincident with the bringing in of the fulness of the Gentiles? If Robertson's exegesis is correct, then Paul should have written, "a partial hardening has happened to Israel, and it is precisely because the hardening is merely partial that all Israel will be saved." But even this is surely a backwards way of saying it. Should he not have written, "not all Israelites have been hardened, but a remnant remains, and in this way all Israel will be saved"?

But this is surely not Paul's intent. He states two things: (1) a partial hardening has happened to Israel, and (2) this partial hardening will exist until the fulness of the Gentiles comes in. What must be recognized is that these two statements are integrally related to one another. And what that relationship is is not hard to discover, for the whole of Romans 11 clearly defines it. For example, Paul tells us that "by their [viz., the Jews'] transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles" (v. 11). The point is as simple as it is unmistakable: the transgression and disobedience of the Jews, on account of which they were cut off from the covenant, is the means by which the Gentiles are being saved. Is not this also the point of verse 25b? "A partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come

in." In other words, God has sovereignly caused many (though not all) Israelites to be hardened and thus cut off *expressly so that* many Gentiles could be saved, and this hardening and cutting off will continue for as long as is necessary for the fulness of the Gentiles to be grafted in. I find it interesting that when Augustine quotes this verse he often translates *achris hou* with *ut*: "Israel has experienced a hardening in part, *that* the fulness of the Gentiles might come in."[6] Calvin agrees: "Until does not specify the progress or order of time, but signifies the same thing, as though he had said, '*That* the fulness of the Gentiles [might come in].'"[7]

Paul could not have used more simple and straightforward language. It is precisely by means of Israel's own partial hardening that Israel is saved. The intermediate link is that by means of Israel's partial hardening, the Gentiles are grafted into the covenant tree in the place of those branches which were cut off. Paradoxically, it is in this way that the covenant tree (=all Israel) is made complete. "All Israel" refers not merely to one part of the covenant tree (elect Jews) but to the whole tree, which includes all the elect, both Jews and Gentiles. Although God could have secured the inclusion of the Gentiles apart from the failure of the Jews, in His mysterious wisdom He has made a way of salvation for the Gentiles that involves them in the very mechanism of God's faithfulness to His covenant tree. God has hardened some Jews in order to save some Gentiles. "And thus all Israel will be saved."[8]

That such is the case is confirmed by the mention of the Gentiles "entering in" (*eiselthein*). Entering into what? The covenant tree, "the commonwealth of Israel" (Eph. 2:12). It serves as a near functional equivalent to the ingrafting imagery of verses 17-24. Commentators commonly mention that this verb is used rarely in Paul (actually one other time, Rom. 5:12), and, therefore, its meaning is sought by

examining its use in other parts of the New Testament. When this is done, the verdict reached is that because Jesus frequently used the verb in reference to "entering the kingdom of God," the same thought should be understood here. Although this would not produce an inaccurate meaning theologically, it serves to distract our minds from the precise point Paul is making in this particular context. Surely, the ingrafting analogy he has so carefully belabored in the preceding verses should take priority over Jesus' usage in the establishment of the precise force of *eiselthein* here. It is no objection that this would constitute a change of metaphor (from ingrafting to entering), for Paul has already demonstrated the flexibility of the ingrafting analogy in verse 20 where he says, "They were broken off for their unbelief, but you *stand* by faith." Thus Paul's point is that a partial hardening has happened to Israel for as long a period of time as it takes for the full number of the Gentiles to be ingrafted in the place of those who are hardened and cut out of the covenant tree.

Perhaps one might think that the language "in the place of" is too strong. However, it is interesting that when the hypothetical Gentile argues (v. 19), "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in," Paul does not answer, "God forbid; you are not grafted in to replace them but beside them." Rather he says, "Granted (*kalos*, v. 20), but don't forget two things: one, that you stand by faith; and two, the patriarchal promises support you and not the other way around." This language makes it clear that the danger of Gentile hubris that Paul seeks to warn against is not the supposed arrogance of the Gentiles' believing that by their salvation they take the place of Israelites who were broken off because of unbelief. Rather, Paul is concerned that the Gentiles not conclude from this state of affairs that they can now presume upon divine favoritism toward them regardless of the presence or absence of living faith (as the

Israelites did), and further that they not forget that their salvation depends on God's faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant. So, then, when Paul says that he does not want the Gentiles "to be ignorant of this mystery, lest you be wise in your own estimation," and then goes on to describe the fulness of Israel's salvation in terms of the combined Jew and Gentile mission, he means for them to understand that their salvation is not a new election in place of the election of the Jews but rather a subordinate (though necessary) element in the grand redemption of "all Israel."[9]

"The Mystery"

A third piece of evidence for my thesis is Paul's use of the term "mystery" here in this context. Where is the mystery, it seems legitimate to ask Robertson, in the idea that all elect Jews will be saved? John Murray makes the same point, albeit in the service of a different conclusion, when he states, "while [it is] true that the fact of election with the certainty of its saving issue is a truth of revelation, it is not in the category that would require the special kind of revelation intimated in the words 'this mystery' (vs. 25)."[10] On the other hand, the revelation that "all Israel" is to be saved by means of the salvation of the Gentiles, is definitely a revelation fittingly denominated a mystery.

And this is only what we would expect. Paul frequently describes the Gospel and its manifold implications as "the mystery." Not least of these implications is the truth of the equality of Jew and Gentile as "co-heirs" and "co-partakers" (*sugkleronoma . . . summetocha*) of the Gospel:

> For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the Gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (Eph. 3:1-6 NIV).

It is true that for Paul the mystery involves more than the status of the Gentiles in the covenant of grace. For example, in Colossians 1:27 Paul defines the mystery as "Christ in you, the hope of glory." But even there the inclusion of the Gentiles in the plan of salvation is in view ("this mystery *among the Gentiles*, which is Christ in you"). Still, it would be reductionistic to narrowly define "the mystery" in Paul's usage as nothing more than the Gentile mission.

Nor would it be sound exegetical method to read into Romans 11:25 the specific content of "the mystery" in Ephesians 3:6. On the other hand, when we notice the obvious parallels between these two passages the likelihood that they both employ "mystery" in approximately the same sense is increased. In both Paul is addressing Gentiles. In both he defines his ministry as peculiarly and uniquely that of "the apostle of Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13). In both he is specifically dealing with the Jew-Gentile problem. In both he emphasizes that the Gentiles are on an equal par with Jews as legitimate heirs of the covenant promises. Since these texts bear such significant parallels, it would seem reasonable to assume that the mysteries they each describe are also parallel in content. Therefore, I conclude that the characterization of the amazing pronouncement in verses 25-26 as "this mystery" adds weight to my contention that "all Israel" includes both Jewish and Gentile Christians.

The Redefinition of Israel As a Theme in Romans

The fourth line of reasoning is the context of Romans as a whole. It would take much more time than is available here to do this properly, but I believe I can show that one of the overarching themes of the epistle to the Romans is to attack a Jewish misunderstanding prevalent in the first century. This misunderstanding was that all Israelites (i.e., the circumcised) would be saved, except perhaps those that had fallen into outright apostasy. A Mishnaic tractate states: "All Israelites have a share in the world to come" (*Sanhedrin* 10:1). It goes on to make the following exceptions: those who deny the resurrection of the dead, who reject the Torah, or who are Epicureans (i.e., given over to immorality and pleasure). Paul's polemic against this arrogant presumption begins in chapter 2, where he openly attacks the favoritism implicit in such a view: "There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to every man who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God" (vv. 9-11). *Partiality* can also be translated *favoritism.* The Jews believed (falsely) that they could live however they pleased in the carnal security that their circumcision would guarantee salvation at the final day (as long as they didn't fall into one of the extremes mentioned in the Mishnah). In essence, the Jews were hoping that God would give them a break at the day of judgment, that He would show partiality to them. Of course the Gentiles could expect no such mercy. Thus, when Paul states that "there will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, *of the Jew first* and also of the Greek," he is making an almost unthinkable assertion.

Now part of Paul's refutation of this sadly mistaken assurance involves a *redefinition* of the value of circumcision. He states, at the end of chapter two: "He is not a Jew who is one outwardly; neither is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter" (2:28-29). In fact, Paul waxes so bold as to ask a most radical question: "If therefore the uncircumcised man keeps the requirements of the Law, will not his uncircumcision be reckoned as circumcision?" (2:26).

Do you see what Paul is doing here? He is upsetting traditional Jewish theology by asserting that it is not circumcision or membership in the community of Israel that determines salvation, but law-keeping. "Not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified" (2:13). If so, then it is *theoretically* possible that many Jews will be condemned and many Gentiles saved. A new criterion is being introduced to define those who are the legitimate heirs of the Abrahamic promises. A new definition of Israel is emerging.

At this point in the argument of Romans, Paul is merely laying a foundation. He has not yet formally introduced the doctrine of Justification by faith alone on account of Christ alone. Therefore it would be unwarranted to read into Paul's statements at this early stage a redefined concept of Israel broad enough to include Gentiles. But the groundwork is being laid. Thus, it is absolutely essential that we take note when Paul picks up on this theme again in chapter 9. Just as in chapter 2, Paul attacks the idea that all circumcised descendants of Abraham are automatically saved. He does so by enlisting two counterexamples that wreak havoc upon the traditional Jewish view that "all Israelites have a share in the world to come." They are Ishmael and Esau (9:6-13), both of whom were circumcised and yet were rejected as children of the promise. Just as Paul redefined circumcision in chapter 2 by saying, in effect, "Not all who are circumcised are circumcised," so he redefines Israel in verse 6, when he says, "Not all who are

of Israel are Israel." Admittedly, the immediate context warrants only a division *within* the community of Israel: some Jews are elect, others are not. It would be to go beyond the text to take the dictum of 9:6 as proof of the idea that Paul is redefining Israel to include anything other than circumcised Jews.

However, later in the same chapter (9:24-26) we find the first explicit reference to Gentiles as equal members with Jews as the people of God. This is evident from two considerations. First, the argument begins at verse 6 and continues to verse 24. Paul has been affirming the sovereignty of God to choose an Isaac and to reject an Esau, to make from the same lump of clay various vessels, some for honor and some for common use. On the face of it, the discussion of unconditional election, up until verse 24, has been focused only on an election within Israel. But at verse 24 Paul widens the scope of his discussion to include the Gentiles. Everything he has just said about the absolutely unconditional nature of God's sovereign election of certain Israelites unto eternal life applies with equal validity to "us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles" (v. 24).

The second consideration is Paul's citation of Hosea 2:23 and 1:10 in verses 25-26. In the original context, Hosea says nothing about Gentiles. The epithet "Not my people" is applied by Hosea with reference to adulterous Israel who is being threatened with covenantal divorce on account of her idolatry. Yet Paul applies the term to the Gentiles. "I will call those who are not My people, 'My people,' and her who was not beloved, 'Beloved.' And it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'You are not my people,' there they shall be called sons of the living God." It is undeniably clear that Paul has finally made explicit an idea that was already implicit back in chapter 2. If there is an election within an election, an Israel within Israel, then it follows

inexorably that the criterion of membership in "God's people" has little to do with circumcision or ethnic relation to Abraham. 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.

Recall that in 2:13 Paul tells us what the criterion for being a true Israelite is: one must be a doer of the Law to be counted as righteous. In the course of his argument, Paul explains how it is that sinners can be justified (counted as righteous) by Law-keeping: by trusting in Christ, the representative doer of the law. "For Christ is the *telos* of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (10:4), "for there is no distinction between Jew and Greek" (10:12). It is no longer circumcision or being a member of the community of Israel after the flesh that constitutes one a true Israelite, a righteous man. Now that Christ has come as the final consummation of all that the Law signified and required (i.e., its *telos*), the only criterion that defines "Israel" is faith in Christ. "There is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all and in all" (Col. 3:11).

Thus, it seems quite clear that in Romans Paul has been building a case, one step at a time, gradually leading to a Christological transformation of the concept "Israel" in such a way that Gentiles may now be included. Paul intentionally established the radical distinction between two Israels, two elections, and two circumcisions for the very purpose of preparing the way for this climactic conclusion (11:26).

N. T. Wright argues that:

> Paul actually began the whole section (9.6) with . . . a programmatic distinction of two "Israels", and throughout the

letter (e.g. 2.25-9) as well as elsewhere (e.g. Philippians 3.2-11) he has systematically transferred the privileges and attributes of "Israel" to the Messiah and his people. It is therefore greatly preferable to take "all Israel" in verse 26 as *a typically Pauline polemical redefinition*, as in Galatians 6:16 . . . and in line also with Philippians 3.2ff., where the church is described as "the circumcision."[11]

Therefore, to take "all Israel" as a reference to the church is not only natural (since the reader has been primed for it ever since chapter 2) but *necessary* in order to achieve a satisfying resolution to the issues that have been raised throughout the course of Paul's extended argument. This interpretation has the great advantage of unifying the first eleven chapters of Romans and bringing the whole to a climactic crescendo of redemptive-historical insight. "And in this manner all Israel shall be saved."

God's Faithfulness to His Promises

The fifth and final argument for taking "all Israel" as a Pauline polemical redefinition of Israel is that it provides a satisfying answer to the burning question: "Has God rejected His people?" (11:1). According to Robertson and those amillennialists of his stripe, Paul's answer is, "No, because elect Jews are being brought to Christ throughout the church age." But isn't this a rather banal conclusion? If this were in fact his solution to the apparent failure of God's promises to His ancient people, why did he have to sweat in an extended theological workout for an entire chapter? If that's all there is to it, why didn't Paul just close the chapter at verse 5? "In the same way then [as God had reserved 7,000 men who had not bowed the knee to Baal], there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice." The reason is that this doesn't really answer the question, "How is God going to come through

on His irrevocable promises to Israel?"

Now, according to postmillennialists and those amillennialists who take "all Israel" to refer to the last generation of Jews, God finally comes through on His promises by sovereignly converting a vast multitude of Jews at once at the end of the age. But isn't this too a bit of a letdown? Why should such a mass revival of only a small portion of all Jews that have ever lived constitute the ultimate fulfillment of God's irrevocable promises to Israel? Surely the premillennialists have a tremendous advantage at this point, since they do not resolve the problem of God's faithfulness merely by positing Jewish conversions on a large scale. They have an earthly millennial kingdom into which they can load as much fulfillment freight as their hearts desire.

Others have ably demonstrated that the premillennial exegesis of Revelation 20 is not a viable exegetical option.12 However, to those who are postmillennialists or one of the other two breeds of amillennialist, I make the following appeal: We have no choice but to presuppose that "the gifts and calling of God" with respect to Israel "are irrevocable" (11:29), and that "God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew" (11:2). We must believe this not only because of the texts cited but for other pertinent theological considerations as well (e.g., God's faithfulness to His promises; the immutability of divine election, etc.). And we must presuppose that this "calling" and "foreknowledge" of Israel pertains to the relationship between God and Israel as a covenantal or corporate entity. God has foreknown Israel, that is, He chose Israel out of all the nations of the earth to be His peculiar people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Deut. 7:6-8; Ex. 19:5-6). Clearly, what we have here is the idea of national election (which is not to be identified with individual election, as the examples of Ishmael and Esau prove).

Now, then, the question we must confront head-on (and

that Paul is addressing in Romans 11) is this: how is it that the vast majority of post-Pentecost Jews have rejected Jesus as the Messiah and are therefore lost? 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 if we reject the premillennial option, we have no choice but to affirm (with Paul and the uniform witness of the New Testament) that the church is the continuation, in fact, the consummation of God's promises to Israel. Individual branches may be removed from the covenant olive tree, but the faithfulness of God guarantees that the olive tree itself will endure, even if that means that new branches must be found to replace the old. God's faithfulness to the promises made to the patriarchs finds expression, not in the salvation of the remnant of elect Jews merely, much less in a future national conversion, but in the entrance of Gentiles into the covenant fold, along with the concomitant jealousy which provokes elect Jews to faith in Christ throughout the church age. It is in this manner that "all Israel" will be saved.

What, then, is Paul's theology of Israel's future? In a word, the church.

Appendix

What about verses 12 and 15? Don't these two verses clearly support the hope of an as-yet future revival of the Jewish nation? Contrary to the apparent import of these verses in English translations, I believe that they do not. A quick reading of the text without consulting the Greek would lead one to believe that Paul has in view a four-step process:

First, the Jews commit the transgression of rejecting Christ.

Second, the failure of the Jews leads to the salvation of the Gentiles.

Third, this makes the Jews jealous, thus causing them to return in faith.

Fourth, this in turn triggers an even greater revival among the Gentiles.

Let me draw your attention to two exegetical points which I think significantly undermine such a construction:

First, this view requires the interpreter to assume, without warrant, that there is an ellipsis at the end of each verse. Thus, verse 12 would be translated: "Now if their transgression be riches for the world and their failure be riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their fulfillment be *riches for the Gentiles*." That last clause is not found in the text, but must be supplied. But there is no warrant for supplying "riches for the Gentiles" instead of "riches for Israel herself."

Second, there are two genitive constructions in verse 12 that are incorrectly translated "riches *for* the world" and "riches *for* the Gentiles." These genitival phrases should be translated "the wealth *of* the world" and "the wealth *of* the Gentiles." When that is done, it becomes impossible not to notice that this is a phrase that occurs frequently in the Septuagint text of Isaiah. In fact, it occurs in the *self-same* context of the passage from which Paul quotes later in verse 26 (Isa. 59:20-60:22). In Isaiah the genitive is most likely epexegetical: "the wealth *which consists of* the Gentiles" (Isa. 60:11; cf. Rev. 21:24-26; Zech. 14:16-19).

Thus, a better translation of verse 12 would read as follows: "Now if their transgression is the wealth of the world and their loss is the wealth of the Gentiles, how much more will their fulness be?" To paraphrase: "If Israel's failure resulted in a wealth of Gentiles flowing into the kingdom, how much more will Israel's fulness be characterized by great wealth?" It is not until we get to verse 26 that we understand more precisely Paul's conception of the nature

of this great wealth (i.e., the glory of Christ's church composed of both Jews and Gentiles).

Author

Lee Irons is pastor of Redeemer Orthodox Presbyterian Chapel, Van Nuys, California. He is married and a 1996 graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, California. He completed a B. A. degree in Greek at U. C. L. A. (1992).

Endnotes

1 O. Palmer Robertson, "Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?", chapter 16 in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 216. Robertson depends heavily on Herman Ridderbos. Ridderbos, "Israel in het Nieuwe Testament, in het bijzonder volgens Rom. 9-11," in *Israel* (Den Haag: Van Keulen, 1955), 57-64, translated by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.

2 John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, reprinted 1993), 437.

3 James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 38B (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 681.

4 C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, International Critical Commentary, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), 576.

5 Dunn, *Romans 9-16*, 689.

6 *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, VII.1 (ML 36,97f); IX.1 (ML 36,117); XIX.5 (ML 36,164); LXXIII.13 (ML 36,937).

7 Calvin, 436. Martin Woudstra paraphrases the verse quite well: "As the fulness of the Gentiles is brought in and 'until' this is finished, so, in this manner, 'all Israel' will be saved." Woudstra, "Israel and the Church: A Case for Continuity," in *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old Testament and the New Testament*, ed. John S. Feinberg (Westchester: Crossway Books, 1988), 236. He also states, "Gentiles now fill up the ranks of all Israel."

8 "During this period of time, the Gentiles are to come in to the people of God: and that is how God is saving 'all Israel' . . . What Paul is saying is this: God's method of saving 'all Israel' is to harden ethnic Israel (cp. 9:14ff.), i.e., not to judge her at once, so as to create a period of time during which the gentile mission could be under-

taken, during the course of which it remains God's will that the present 'remnant' of believing Jews might be enlarged by the process of 'jealousy,' and consequent faith, described above. This whole process is God's way of saving his whole people: that is the meaning of 'and so all Israel shall be saved.'" N. T. Wright, "Christ, the Law and the People of God: Romans 9-11," in *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 249-50.

9 Markus Barth writes, "The indestrucible co-inherence of the salvation of the Jews with the salvation of the newcomers from the Gentile nations is most strikingly formulated in Rom. 11:25-26: 'A hardening has come upon part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles comes in [to Zion], and so the whole of Israel will be saved.'" *The People of God* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1983), 33.

10 John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 97.

11 Wright, 250.

12 Meredith G. Kline, "The First Resurrection," *Westminster Theological Journal,* 37 (1975), 366-75. Cf. also William Hendriksen, *More Than Conquerors: An Interpretation of the Book of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).