

Introduction

Anyone who writes on prophecy is asking for trouble. So why am I doing it? Well, strictly speaking, I am not ‘writing on prophecy’. All I am doing is to put forward what I call ‘a suggested exegesis’ of Romans 11. But, having said that, even though I use ‘suggested’, I think what I say has some merit, otherwise why would I be saying it? So, while I do not pretend that this work is the last word on this major chapter of Scripture, I offer it to the public because I think it merits consideration. That’s what I am after in the first instance. Reader, I want to give you something to think about. And Romans 11 deserves thinking about, does it not? Any contribution to serious thought about this important chapter must be worthwhile, must it not?

The trouble is, many take the apostle’s words in Romans 11 and push them far beyond what he actually said. And *that* is my point: what does Paul actually say, *and say in this chapter and its context?* Many take a host of other scriptures and read them into Romans 11. They may be justified in this. But they may not! What does Paul actually say here? Reading material into the passage, and then drawing out far-reaching conclusions, can lead to all sorts of distortion, imbalance and downright misunderstanding.

Let me say what I mean. For many people, ‘Israel’ has all the hallmarks of being one of the most important words in the entire Bible. But an inordinate emphasis on Israel – note my use of ‘inordinate’ – is quite wrong in the light of the New Testament and the new covenant. Of course, to say such a thing will put me right out of court with many; the slightest hint of a suggestion that there might not be a spiritual future for national Israel is the reddest of all red rags to them. Even so, I stand by my assertion. When ‘Israel’ is pushed beyond the post-Pentecost use of the word,¹ all

¹ The great mistake in this debate is to start with the Old Testament (and then the Gospels) and read them into the post-Pentecost Scriptures. The right way is to read the Bible the other way round. All Scripture is the word of God, of course, but we must take full account of the new covenant, and read the Bible properly: as both continuous and

Introduction

sorts of distortion in biblical interpretation follows. And worse. For some, 'Israel' becomes a downright obsession, virtually sidelining almost everything else. Indeed, having witnessed at close quarters the long-term spiritual damage which such an emphasis can produce, I hope my booklet might help someone tempted in that direction to think again. When 'Israel' dominates the scene, Christ (and his gospel) can be relegated and diminished – and worse. Yes, I mean it! *That* is why I write.

For a start, some seem to think in terms of more than one way of salvation. This is abhorrent. It is ruled out by the New Testament. Furthermore, some seem to think that nationality (being a Jew) brings grace.² This, too, is wrong. All such conclusions and outcomes are totally foreign to the New Testament. Indeed, they are utterly forbidden by the New Testament:

As the Scripture says: 'Anyone who trusts in him will never be put to shame'. For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile – the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for: 'Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Rom. 10:11-13; see also Rom. 3:22-23,29).

Coming to Romans 11 itself, I cannot believe that Paul, after writing the first ten chapters of Romans, really wants us to start thinking about the future of the *nation* of Israel. After all that the apostle has said so clearly and so powerfully in those preceding chapters, that surely cannot be his thrust in Romans 11. Having told us plainly that the Jews, as Jews, are not the real descendants of Abraham – the true descendants of Abraham are believers (Jew or Gentile) (Rom. 2:28-30; 4:1-25; 9:6-9; 10:11-13) – he cannot possibly be teaching that being a Jew makes a man special in these

discontinuous, with the emphasis on the latter, letting the new covenant interpret the old. See my *Christ is All*, Brachus, Wilstead, 2013; *Battle for the Church*, second edition, Brachus, Biggleswade, 2011; *Psalm 119 and the New Covenant*, Brachus, Wilstead, 2014.

² I will use 'Israelite' and 'Jew' as interchangeable. Paul, however, does not. In Rom. 1 – 8, Paul uses 'Jew' a great deal, whereas in Rom. 9 – 11, he rarely uses it, preferring 'Israel'. 'Jew' is the term used by Gentiles to describe the Hebrew people, often in a sneering way. 'Israel' defines them in a significant way as the nation within salvation history. By my use of 'Jew', I mean nothing pejorative, nothing whatever.

Introduction

days of the new covenant. Paul wrote Romans 11 to prove that God's will has not failed (Rom. 9:6), not to turn 'Israel' into something that it is not.

And, of course, we have to come to terms with Christ's words to the Jews: 'Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken from you and given to a nation bearing the fruits of it' (Matt. 21:43).

Coupled with this, we have many other scriptures which tell us that it is the spiritual descendants of Abraham, believers, who are the true Israelites (John 1:47; 8:39; Gal. 3:26-29; 6:15-16; Eph. 2:11-22; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:9-15; 1 Pet. 2:9-10).

None of this must be jettisoned when we open Romans 11. This can be broadened. When reading this chapter, we must not forget what is set out in the rest of Scripture on the subject of salvation history; that is, the way God in his word develops the revelation and accomplishment of the salvation of the elect according to his eternal decree. This is a big topic, but it involves the continuity/discontinuity of the Testaments, the purpose and place of the law, and – especially for this booklet – the place of Israel in the purposes of God. Do not miss the 'but now' of Romans 3:21; 5:11; 6:22; 7:6; 16:26; see also Hebrews 8:6-7,13; 10:15-18. This eschatological 'but now' divides history into two great epochs – law and grace, the ages of Moses and Christ, old covenant and new – and its consequences permeate the entire New Testament. 'The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17). In particular, Paul's argument in Romans 3:21 and on, and the letter to the Galatians, to mention but two places, depends on it. The law takes its place in this. And so does Israel. According to God's will, the age of the law was until Christ (Gal. 3:23-25). Now that Christ has come and fulfilled it, the law is obsolete (Heb. 7:12,18-19,22; 8:6-13; 9:10; 10:1-2,15-18).³

Israel was formed into a nation so that, through the nation, God might fulfil his purpose in salvation history.⁴ That purpose was

³ I might say 'the age of the nation of Israel' or 'the age of Moses' (John 1:17) was until Christ, and both are now fulfilled and, therefore, obsolete (Heb. 7:18; 8:13).

⁴ In my *Christ*, I argued that Israel became a nation – the people of God – upon leaving Egypt; that is, virtually at the start of the old covenant and

Introduction

twofold: Israel was privileged to be given God's law through Moses on Sinai, and to bear Christ under the law. As for the first, we have an abundance of scriptures (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4, and so on). As for the second: 'When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons' (Gal. 4:4-5; see also Luke 2:27,39). But Christ has now come, fulfilled and, therefore, abolished, the old covenant, having established the new covenant. Thus Israel's role has ended – along with the role of the old covenant and the law. If I may take the apostle's words: 'Christ is the end of the law' (Rom. 10:4) and accommodate them in this way: 'Christ is the end, the fulfilment, the goal, the terminus, the end point of Israel as a special people'. Again: 'What, then, was the purpose of the law? It was added because of transgressions until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come' (Gal. 3:19), I might accommodate thus: 'What, then, was the purpose of the nation of Israel as a special people? It lasted until the Seed to whom the promise referred had come'.

Let me probe this. It is necessary so to do. What is Israel's special role now that Christ has come and set up the new covenant? Only the New Testament can answer this question. Let me repeat that: only the *New Testament* can tell us.

And it does! The New Testament is clear. It tells us that Israel's special role has ceased. In Christ, all national divisions are abolished. In particular, the division between Jew and Greek (Gal. 3:28-29; Col. 3:11) has gone. The physical has given way to the spiritual (John 4:21-24; Rom. 14:17). Indeed, all old covenant divisions are rendered obsolete and have been annulled (Gal. 5:6; 6:15; Heb. 7:18-19; 8:13). It does not matter now whether a man is a Jew or a Gentile. He is either a believer or an unbeliever; *that* is the real, the great, the only divide among men. And the *ekklēsia*, the church, the body of believers, is made up of all believing Jews and Gentiles, all believers forming Christ's 'one new man' (Eph. 2:15), 'a people belonging to God' (1 Pet. 2:9), 'his own special people' (1 Pet. 2:9, NKJV). All these covenant changes are irreversible. In Christ, old-covenant divisions will never apply, can

the giving of the law. The three – the nation (as the people of God), the old covenant and the law – are inseparable; they stand or fall together.

Introduction

never apply, national distinctions will never count, the physical will never dominate. Old-covenant principles and practices have gone, have gone for ever, and will never be reintroduced. They are all fulfilled in Christ. Their day has run its course. Their sun has set.

Of course, Jews can still be saved. The view I am putting forward has nothing to do with anti-Semitism. I abhor the very thought of it! Jews can be saved, I say again, and say with all the energy I can muster. Indeed, the first converts were Jews (Acts 2) – the gospel was sent to the Jews first (Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; 3:26; 10:36; 13:26,46; Rom. 1:16; 2:9-10; see also Isa. 56:8; Matt. 10:5-6; 15:24; John 10:16), and did not reach the Gentiles until Acts 10.

*But none of this means that God has a saving purpose for **the nation of Israel**.* He has not – any more than he has any further use for the temple, the altar, the feasts, the sabbath, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the land.⁵ All are gone. All were shadows, and all have been fulfilled and therefore abolished by Christ:

Do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a new moon celebration or a sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ (Col. 2:16-17).

Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer. If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law. They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain’. But

⁵ What about the law? The age of the law has passed, but the law itself remains part of ‘all Scripture’ and is, therefore ‘profitable’ for the believer (2 Tim. 3:16-17). But Paul shows us the way to use it in the new covenant. He occasionally treats it as a paradigm (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14-15; Eph. 6:1-4), and he also refers to it by way of illustration (1 Cor. 5:6-8; 9:7-14, and so on). Even so, he is willing to use anything to make his point, including the history of Israel (1 Cor. 10:1-11; see also Rom. 4:23-24; 15:4), nature, common sense or Greek poets (Acts 17:28-29; 1 Cor. 11:14; Tit. 1:12-13). The law of Moses, as the law of God, has ceased, being fulfilled, completed and terminated by Christ (Rom. 10:4). The law of God in the new covenant is the law of Christ. See my *Christ*.

Introduction

the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises (Heb. 8:3-6).

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves (Heb. 10:1).

God no more has a saving purpose for the nation of Israel than he has for the United Kingdom, the United States or any other people. The gospel is for sinners – sinners of every nation.

Israel will not be ‘restored’! When men speak of ‘the restoration of Israel’, what do they mean by it? Restored to salvation? Restored? Was Israel ever a nation of believers? Was Israel, as a nation, ever saved – in the full spiritual sense of the word? Certainly not! Hebrews 3:7 – 4:8 is very clear. The saved among Israel were always a remnant. And the fact that there were 7000 believers in Israel in Elijah’s time means that there must have been many thousands of unbelievers also. No, ‘the restoration of Israel’, if it means anything at all, can only mean the reinstatement of Israel as it was under the old covenant. Really? Do these who talk about ‘the restoration of Israel’ really mean that? Will the temple, the feasts, the sabbath, the levitical priesthood, the altar and the sacrifices be reinstated? Will the kingdom be re-established in all its glory?⁶

Amazingly, some do believe this will happen.⁷ But the old covenant has gone for ever, gone with all its distinctions, practices and principles. Talk of ‘the restoration of Israel’ is careless and grossly misguided. Israel will never be restored, the kingdom will never be re-established. The temple, the feasts, the sabbath, the levitical priesthood, the altar and the sacrifices and all the rest, are gone forever, abolished by Christ who fulfilled them all. The sun

⁶ What, precisely, will the territorial limits of the kingdom be?

⁷ Just before Pentecost, the apostles were looking for such a restoration (Acts 1:6-7). Matthew Henry explains why Christ did not categorically deny it: ‘He does not contradict their expectation that the kingdom would be restored to Israel, because that mistake would soon be rectified by the pouring out of the Spirit, after which they never had any more thoughts of the temporal kingdom; and also because there is a sense of the expectation which is true, the setting up of the gospel kingdom in the world’.

Introduction

of righteousness has risen, and the old covenant dimly-lit shadows have vanished.⁸

There is another vital principle to keep in mind. When it comes to interpreting the Old Testament, we must be governed by the way the New Testament does it. This would seem to be the truism to end all truisms – but, sadly, it is not. Let me give but one example of the way in which the New Testament takes, interprets and applies an Old Testament prophecy in this regard. Take Jeremiah 31:31-34, the prophecy of the new covenant. God prophesied that he would write his law on the heart of Israel and Judah. Was God saying that he would write the Mosaic law on the hearts of the Jews? If so, was he saying he would do this at the end of this present age, at the return of Christ, in an earthly millennial kingdom lasting 1000 years? Or... what? To keep this booklet in bounds, I omit my reasoning,⁹ but the New Testament – Hebrews 8:7-13; 10:15-18, in particular – makes it very plain that Jeremiah’s prophecy applies to all believers today. Jeremiah was prophesying that the law of Christ would be written on the heart of the new Israel of God (Gal. 6:2,16) in the new covenant.¹⁰ This apostolic doctrine is the key which we can use – the key we must use – to unlock the treasures of Romans 11.

Let us not forget that an Israelite is not saved because he is an Israelite. It never was the case. It certainly is not now. Nor is he saved in any other way than by faith in Christ. Nor is Israel going to be saved ‘as a nation’.¹¹ Whether Jew or Gentile, a man must individually repent and believe in Christ.

⁸ See my *Christ; Psalm 119; The Priesthood of All Believers*, Brachus, Biggleswade, 2011.

⁹ For all this, see my *Christ*, especially chapter 18, my *Psalm 119*, and my *The Glorious New-Covenant Ministry*, Brachus, Wilstead, 2014.

¹⁰ In addition, take Acts 15:13-18 on Amos 9:11-15. Take also the use of ‘Zion’ in Rom. 9:33; 11:26; Heb. 12:22 and 1 Pet. 2:6. See ‘Jerusalem’ and Paul’s use of Isa. 54:1 in Gal. 4:25-27. And so on.

¹¹ But what of Caiaphas’ words: ‘It is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish’? John explained: ‘He did not say this on his own, but as high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus would die for the Jewish nation, and not only for that nation but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one’ (John 11:50-52). I take this to mean that Christ would die for all the elect,

Introduction

In whatever way we interpret Romans 11, these fundamental New Testament points must be borne in mind. Any interpretation which moves in the direction of restoring old-covenant practices and divisions, or argues that Jews will be saved because they are Jews, or that they will be saved in a different way to other sinners, must of necessity be wrong. Such things would be an abomination to God, and destructive of the gospel. However we interpret Paul in Romans 11, we dare not make him contradict his own teaching elsewhere – or that of any other post-Pentecost sacred writing, not least the letter to the Hebrews.

whether Jew or Gentile. Those who take it to mean that Christ died for the nation of Israel and all the elect among the Gentiles have to accept that every last Jew will be saved – which is plainly wrong (witness Judas).