

The Exegesis

And so to the exegesis proper. What follows will not be an exhaustive exposition of the chapter. Rather, I concentrate on those points which are especially pertinent as to whether or not Romans 11 teaches a large-scale conversion of the Jews followed by unmitigated blessing for the world. That, and the effect it has on preaching the gospel, marks the limit of my aim in this chapter.

The opening question

‘I say then’, Paul asks, ‘has God cast away his people?’ His answer is unequivocal: ‘Certainly not!’ (Rom. 11:1, NKJV). This question (the apostle’s own, remember) – along with its answer – is vital to the proper understanding of the chapter. It surely tells us what was in the apostle’s mind and heart. And the same goes for his answer. Paul did not say something such as: ‘I want you to know that God will convert Jews, and convert them in huge numbers, ushering in a world-wide awakening and revival. When will it be? How will it come about? Read on!’ Yet this is precisely what many people think this chapter is all about. Clearly it is not. Rather: ‘Has God cast away his people? In light of all they have done to his Son and his gospel, has he utterly and completely and finally rejected them so that no Jew will ever be saved?’ This is what Paul had in mind, this is what he asked, and this is what he answered.

Having opened in this way, throughout the rest of Romans 11 the apostle proceeds to prove his point. Which is? God has *not* cast away the Jews; Jews are *not* rejected because they are Jews; despite everything, God will still save his elect among them. *This* is what Paul sets out to prove. But in making his case, the apostle has two subsidiary – though very important – purposes in mind. First, he is determined to put a stop to any Gentile believers bragging, vaunting themselves, preening themselves, over the rejected Jews. Secondly, and more pressingly, he wants to use his argument, *and use it at every stage*, to do all he can to gain the conversion of as many Jews as possible. *But more than this must*

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not be read into Romans 11. Sadly, too often, far more *is* read into Romans 11. And then read back out of it!

Let me restate this: Paul is not setting out to prove that every Jew will be saved. He is not setting out to prove that a huge number of Jews will be saved. What he is setting out to do is to show that, despite their general wretched rejection of Christ – both in his person, and when the gospel is preached to them – God will still have mercy on Jews; he has not cast them off irretrievably; and all the elect among them will be saved. This fact – *fact* – must govern the way in which we understand this chapter. And, as important ‘spin-offs’, the apostle is setting out to put a stop to any Gentile boasting, nipping it in the bud, and to do all he can to encourage his fellow-Jews to come to Christ.

Moreover, as I have already stressed, scriptural teaching on the new covenant elsewhere must not be forgotten or ignored. Indeed, that teaching must be remembered at all times. Romans 11 does not stand as a theological atoll rising out of the ocean, isolated and far removed from all around, with no connection with what is said – or not said – elsewhere in Scripture. We must not treat Romans 11 as though the clear, unequivocal new-covenant teaching of Romans 3 – 8, Galatians, Philippians 3:2-11, Hebrews, to name but a sample of the many passages of Scripture which deal with the matter,¹ does not exist. In addition, Scripture affords no support for the view that Jews will be saved because they are Jews; they will not; they do not have an automatic right to salvation simply because they are Jews. Yet this has been claimed. And it is utterly wrong. *Even so, Jews will be saved*. What is more, as with all his elect, God always – always, and only – saves sinners through an *individual* response to Christ and his gospel (Rom. 1:16). The Jews are sinners individually and need to be saved individually (Rom. 2:1 – 3:20).² They will not be saved ‘as a nation’. No *nation* has ever been saved. No *nation* ever will be saved. The New Testament shows us that it is the saved who form the nation of God (1 Pet. 2:9-10), not the other way round.

¹ As you can see, most of it by Paul himself.

² Note Peter’s ‘let every one of you’, every single one of you, when addressing ‘all the house of Israel’ (Acts 2:36,38, NKJV). See also Acts 3:23,26; 5:31-32; 10:34-43; 13:38-39, and so on.

Let me stress this with all the power at my disposal. While Romans 11 does speak of Israel in the corporate, ***the thrust of the apostle's argument concerning the way of salvation is entirely, utterly and only individual.*** And this applies to both Jew and Gentile; especially, in this context, to the Jews.

In short, when we reach the end of Romans 11, we must be persuaded that, despite Israel's rejection of Christ, God has not cast away the Jews. The door of mercy is still open to them, for God is still willing to save Jews. Beyond that, he *will* save Jews, and is doing so throughout this age, and doing it individually through faith in Christ. *This* is what Paul sets out to prove (along with seeking to encourage his fellow-Jews to come to Christ). Anything other than this – especially the idea that millions of Jews will be converted in a glorious awakening and world-wide revival – is foreign to the apostle's purpose, and way beyond his own stated aims.

'I say then', Paul asks, 'has God cast away his people?' (Rom. 11:1, NKJV). 'Certainly not!' (Rom. 11:1, NKJV). And he begins his answer, he begins to make his case, by reference to his own experience – after all *he* was a Jew (Rom. 11:1), and yet he had been converted!³ Clearly if God had now totally and finally abandoned the Jews then he – Paul – would not have been saved. *Q.E.D.* But note the smallness of the apostle's claim, nevertheless one which is entirely in keeping with his clear teaching on 'the remnant' in general, and his stated aim in this chapter in particular. Far from thinking in terms of the conversion of the nation – now, what a proof *that* would have been! – he speaks of just *one* conversion, his own. And what a conversion! He who had wanted to exterminate Christ in his followers – he had been converted!

And how vital is his emphasis on the individual nature of conversion. How necessary it is to stress this today, when individual conversion is under heavy and sustained attack on more than one front – an attack which is sometimes open, but is more often subtle, an attack which slowly and surreptitiously saps the life out of the biblical concept. Those who speak in terms of the conversion of Israel *en masse*, as a nation, (without being aware of

³ *kai... egō*, 'even... I'.

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it, I dare say) are playing into the hands of such teachers, not least the advocates of the New Perspective.⁴

Paul's opening claim was small, I repeat; it was just one conversion. But what a conversion! Hear him:

Though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life (1 Tim. 1:13-16).

Surely this speaks for itself. Paul's conversion surely offers hope for the worst of sinners – whether he be a Gentile or Jew; in this context, especially a Jew. As I say, this is one of the apostle's purposes in writing Romans 11. He wants to encourage as many of his fellow-Jews as possible to come to Christ, and prove God's mercy for themselves – just as he himself had. No matter how low they have fallen, no matter how stubborn they have been, no matter how bitterly or blasphemously they have spoken or thought of Christ, no matter how resolutely they have hated him, God will yet have mercy on them – if they come to Jesus. God still stands with his hands outstretched in mercy. As God himself declares: 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people' (Rom. 10:21). No wonder then that Jesus, when he was commanding his disciples to take the gospel into all the world, made it clear that they had to begin at Jerusalem, to begin with the Jerusalem sinner (Luke 24:45-49). In other words, the first sinners to be offered Christ were the very ones who cried out for his crucifixion, despised and taunted him at the foot of the cross.⁵ Indeed, I am sure that Judas himself, if he had sought forgiveness at the hand of Christ, would have received it. I am more than sure

⁴ See my *Conversion Ruined*, Brachus, Wilstead, 2013; *The Hinge in Romans 1 – 8*, Brachus, Wilstead, 2014.

⁵ To see what is meant by that, read John Bunyan: *The Jerusalem Sinner Saved*. See also my sermon: 'Begin At Jerusalem! Why?' (sermonaudio.com).

of it: the word of God warrants me to state without fear of contradiction that Judas perished only because he did not seek forgiveness and cleansing in the blood of Christ. *This* is the measure of God's mercy – to Jews and Gentiles.

So much for the apostle's opening question. But this is not enough for Paul. He goes further. He now makes a categorical statement.

A categorical statement

The apostle has established that God is still willing to save Jews, that the door of his mercy is still open to them.⁶ But, as I say, this is not enough for Paul. God will never go back on his electing decree: 'God has not cast away [has not rejected, NASB] his people whom he foreknew' (Rom. 11:2, NKJV; see also AV).⁷ Those whom he has determined to save, God will save, whatever the past, whatever comes between his decree and the actual conversion of every one of the elect. And the Jews are no exception. Despite Israel's appalling track record, God will save every last elect Jew.⁸

⁶ I will not keep saying it, but the same applies to Gentiles, of course, but we are talking about Jews.

⁷ The NIV has introduced a comma which might well mislead: 'God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew'. The NKJV, as above, is much better. The point is, 'whom he foreknew' does not merely define or qualify 'his people'; it is the reason behind Paul's assertion that God's eternal purpose will stand. What he has determined, he will accomplish. Incidentally, the apostle uses the Septuagint of 1 Sam. 12:22; Ps. 94:14. 'For the sake of his great name the LORD will not reject his people' (1 Sam. 12:22, NIV). Furthermore, in Rom. 11:2 '*has not cast away*' (NKJV) is better than '*did not reject*' (NIV). God is still not rejecting his elect. He never will.

⁸ When he spoke of 'his people whom he foreknew', Paul might have been referring to God's election of the Jews as a nation (as in Amos 3:2, for instance), and speaking of God's purpose for Israel in salvation history. The apostle, however, can also use 'foreknow' in the individual sense; namely, election to salvation (Rom. 8:29; 9:6-29). The context here favours personal election of the remnant to salvation (Rom. 11:4-7). But whichever it is, Paul's main point stands: the Jews are not irretrievably cut off from salvation. Alas, some commentators make too much of Rom. 11:2. Israel had a special role in the old covenant, but this did not mean

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But we must be clear. As Paul tells us, from the beginning of his dealings with them, God has always had a remnant among the Jews, he has a remnant still, and always will have. But only a remnant. A remnant? Yes, indeed. Within the nation of Israel, some have always been his elect; most Jews have not, but some have. Paul draws on the 7000 of Elijah's time to make the point, going on to argue that the same applies today. Only a remnant of Jews will be saved, but that remnant will be saved. However black it looks, whatever Israel has done to his Son, however bitterly they have treated him, hating and rejecting him, crucifying him, even persecuting him still in his members – witness Paul himself (Acts 9:1-5; 22:4,7-8; 26:9-11,14-15; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:13,23; Phil. 3:6; 1 Tim. 1:13) – God has not gone back on his decree; nor will he. The elect within Israel will be brought to faith in Christ. True, the rest are hardened, but, whatever happens, God will not go back on his purpose in election (Rom. 11:2-10). It stands now (Rom. 11:5). His gifts and calling are irrevocable (Rom. 11:28-29). As we have seen, Paul put himself forward as a signal example of this – despite his being a Jew who, before his conversion, hated Christ with venom (Acts 9:1-2,4). Paul never tired of making the point, amazed at God's mercy to him (Acts 26:9-18; Gal. 1:13-16; Phil. 3:4-11; 1 Tim. 1:13-16). If God can save me – me of all people – he argues, then God can save any man, *including Jews*. After all, I was not only 'the worst of sinners' (1 Tim. 1:15-16), but I was a *Jewish* worst of sinners. And yet God saved me!

So, as to Paul's first purpose in writing Romans 11 – is there no hope that any Jew might be saved? – the apostle gives a clear and categorical answer: the elect will be saved; they are being saved now, and this includes Jews. It is this last that Paul is establishing here. The Jews are not cast away beyond all hope. The Gentiles had better not forget it! They have no grounds for pride.

All this takes up themes Paul has already brought up and established in Romans 9 – but with a difference. In Romans 9, Paul argued that there is *only* a remnant that will be saved; in Romans

that Israel was saved as a nation during the time of that covenant. Nor does it mean that God has a saving purpose for Israel as a nation in the new covenant. As above, God has never saved any *nation*. He saves *individuals* and makes them into his nation (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

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11 he is making the point that this remnant *will indeed be* saved: Jews are not going to be written off because they are Jews and have proved so hard to the gospel, even to the extent of playing the major role in the crucifixion of God's Son. However obstinate Israel in general has been, some – the elect remnant – will be saved, no matter how stoutly they have resisted the gospel; no matter how tightly they have closed their minds and hearts to Christ, the elect – the remnant – among them will be saved. God's electing purpose will never be thwarted. Even though they were once (Rom. 10:21), like all men, Gentiles included (Rom. 5:10; 8:6-8; 1 Cor. 2:14; Eph. 2:1-3,12; 4:17-19; Col. 1:21), dead in sins and haters of God, the remnant will be saved; they are being saved.

As we go on in this chapter, this point about 'the remnant' must not be forgotten or buried in a welter of misplaced euphoric speculation about 'all Israel'. God has *only* a remnant among the Jews, *but he does have that remnant*. God's people are always a remnant. And this includes Jews. But that remnant will be saved. And this, too, includes Jews.

We now move on to a very important section. It's not too much to say that if we get this next passage right, we shall be kept from the triumphalist interpretation which so many place upon the later verses in Romans 11. If we get this passage wrong, however – or, as so often, people who get it right here ignore or forget it as they move on – we can end up making all sorts of wild, inconsistent and exaggerated claims for the supposed future of Israel. I am, of course, talking about Paul's use of the phrases 'the elect' and 'the hardened':

At the present time there is *a remnant* chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but *the elect* did. The others were *hardened*, as it is written: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day'. And David says: 'May their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. May their eyes be darkened so they cannot see, and their backs be bent forever' (Rom. 11:5-10, citing Deut. 29:4; Ps. 69:22-23; Isa. 29:10).

Before we can continue our measured progress through Romans 11, therefore, we must be clear on the vital distinction which the apostle makes, throughout Romans 9 – 11, between ‘the elect’ and ‘the hardened’ within Israel.

Since the reasoning is somewhat involved, this is how I propose to set about this part of my exposition: I will simply summarise my conclusions here. The detailed argument may be found in the Appendix.

‘The elect’ and ‘the hardened’

Fundamental to an understanding of Romans 9 – 11 is Paul’s division of Israel into two: ‘the elect’ and ‘the hardened’, the composition of each group being determined by God’s decree.⁹ As the apostle makes clear, there is no possibility of any transfer from one group to the other; these two groups are mutually exclusive; the elect will come to glory, but the rest will suffer wrath. If this is forgotten, all sorts of trouble will ensue when trying to understand the apostle. Alas, it is forgotten – or ignored!

In Romans 9 – 11, Paul uses ‘the hardened’ to delineate those who are not elect; in other words, the reprobate, those who are irreversibly blinded, judicially hardened. Take: ‘God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden’ (Rom. 9:18). In the context of Romans 9, it is clear that Paul is thinking of the elect and the non-elect. The same goes for: ‘There is a remnant chosen by grace. And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace. What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened’ (Rom. 11:5-7). Here we have it: ‘the elect’ and ‘the others’, ‘the elect’ and ‘the hardened’.

In Scripture, being ‘hardened’ sometimes speaks of a blindness which can be reversed (Mark 6:52; 8:17; 2 Cor. 3:14-16). At other times – in our passage – it speaks of God judicially blinding the sinner with a hardness which cannot be reversed. Sometimes, we are not sure (Mark 3:5; John 12:40; Eph. 4:18-19).

⁹ The same could be said of Gentiles; indeed, all men. But it is Israel which concerns Paul here.

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Of course, all the elect, before conversion, are dead in sin, hostile to God, blinded and hardened in the lesser sense (Eph. 2:1-3). Even so, the elect are never hardened in the judicial sense, and the hardened (in the judicial sense) are never elect; there is no possibility of either. Speaking of Israel, the elect – that is, the remnant – will be saved, whereas the non-elect, the hardened, will not be saved, cannot be saved. It is in this judicial sense of ‘hardened’ that the apostle speaks in Romans 11. The context makes this very clear.

In short: Paul, in Romans 9 – 11, writes on the basis of this *permanent* and *irreversible* divide within Israel: ‘the elect’ and ‘the hardened’.¹⁰ This divide is fundamental to a right understanding of the passage.

Bearing in mind this distinction between ‘the elect’ and ‘the hardened’, let us proceed with the exegesis of the chapter. And as we go on, we shall see how Paul, as so often, picks up a theme and develops it in order to take the revelation of God’s wisdom in the gospel further than before. He does this very thing at Romans 11:11, which represents a critical node in the three chapters. Even so, what we have seen thus far must not be forgotten. Certainly, nothing must be deduced from the following verses which would contradict it.

Romans 11:11

Again I ask: Did they [the Jews] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.

Who are the ‘they’ who have stumbled? Paul is speaking about the people of Israel. The Israelites generally, as a people, as a whole, have stumbled. Now ‘stumbled’ here is not the same as ‘hardened’ in the previous verses. The hardening in the context of Romans 9 – 11 is secret, a feature of God’s decree, the extent of which and to

¹⁰ Many get this wrong. They think that some of ‘the hardened’ Jews will be saved – indeed, some go so far as to think that *all* ‘the hardened’ Jews will be saved – and saved in a coming day, maybe calling that time ‘the last days’. This is quite wrong in this context, wrong on two counts. But as, I have said, I refer you to the Appendix for the detailed argument, and for my answers to certain objections which are raised against it.

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whom it applies being known only to God. On the other hand, the stumbling, the refusal of the Jews as a whole to receive Christ, is open and obvious to all:

[Christ] was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him (John 1:10-11).

As Christ himself told the Jews:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing (Matt. 23:37).

You refuse to come to me to have life (John 5:40).

The Jews stumbled. Hence Paul's question: 'Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?' And what an astounding answer: 'Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious'; or as the NKJV, 'to provoke them to jealousy'. Israel's stumbling was not the climax of God's purpose. Rather, he always intended to use their stumbling to reach a greater end; namely, to take the gospel to the Gentiles, and that, in turn, to make Israel envious.

The apostle does not say that the stumbling of *the non-elect in Israel* leads to the gospel being taken to the Gentiles, which in turn provokes *the elect within Israel*; rather, it is the stumbling of *Israel as a whole, as a people*, which leads to the gospel being taken to the Gentiles, which in turn provokes *Israel as a whole* to envy. Israel (in general, as a people) has not obtained mercy (Rom. 9:30-32; 10:3; 11:7); Israel (in general, as a people) has stumbled; Israel (in general, as a people) is provoked to jealousy through God's blessing of the Gentiles.

The Jews (as a people) rejected Christ and his gospel, but this is not the end of the story. Of course, those who do not trust Christ, and die in that condition, *will* perish – as all sinners in that position must, Gentiles every bit as much as Jews, and *vice-versa* (Rom. 2:9-12); they will 'fall', be utterly and eternally ruined:

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save

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the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, *but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son...* Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, *but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him* (John 3:16-18,36).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that no Jew can now be saved. Paul has already made the case which proves this, but he now takes the matter further, giving additional revelation. Even in the stumbling of the Jews, God had a purpose. Without in any way being tainted by Israel's sin, without in any way excusing Israel for their responsibility and accountability, God used Israel's stumbling to further his intention to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Our minds are too small to unravel the complexity involved in all this, but this is nothing new. The Scriptures are full of such spiritual conundrums, conundrums we can receive only by faith.¹¹

So here we have it: the Jews as a whole sinned so that¹² – in order that – the gospel would be taken to the Gentiles. And this in turn...¹³ Now here's an interesting question! Let me quote the verse once more: 'Again I ask: Did they [the Jews] stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious'. This is often assumed to mean that Paul is predicting that when the Jews see that the gospel is received by the Gentiles, this, in turn will provoke the Jews themselves to come to Christ. Is that really what the apostle is saying?

I think not! For a start, he is not *predicting* anything. He is making a statement of fact. And he is talking in the present – the apostle's present, not to say his immediate past – certainly not the future: 'Because of [Israel's] transgression, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles to make Israel envious'.

¹¹ See my *The Gospel Offer is Free*, Brachus, Biggleswade, first edition 2004, second edition 2012.

¹² It was God's purpose; the Jews had no thought of it.

¹³ Incidentally, there is a gospel application here. In addressing Gentile sinners, we can point out how, *in the plan of God* the Jews have lost in order to grant the Gentiles the gospel. So much so, could it not serve as an argument to encourage Gentiles to possess their possessions?

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And as for ‘envious’, the word comes from *parazēloō*,¹⁴ ‘to provoke to jealousy or rivalry’, and this word is also used in Romans 10:19: ‘I will make you envious by those who are not a nation; I will make you angry¹⁵ by a nation that has no understanding’. Let me explore this a little.

Luke, in the Acts, recorded this bitter hatred manifested by the Jews when they saw the Gentiles receiving the gospel (Acts 5:17; 13:45; 17:5). Luke’s word, *zēlos*, is different, though connected, to the apostle’s. Now *zēlos* can have a positive connotation: ‘excitement of mind, ardour, fervour of spirit, ardour in embracing, defending’, but it can also carry the sense of ‘fierceness of indignation, punitive zeal’; or, as in Acts 5:17; 13:45, and (in its verbal form) Acts 17:5, ‘to have an envious and contentious rivalry, jealousy’. Luke clearly means that the Jews were jealous of the Gentiles in the bitter sense (Acts 13:45-50; 14:2,4-5,19; 1 Thess. 2:15-16). Is it possible that the ‘envy’ in Romans 11:11 could be this same bitter jealousy and anger? I think it is possible.

The fact is, if the ‘envy’ is to be taken in the good, positive sense, it means that Jews are being moved to come to Christ for themselves because they see the Gentiles being converted. But I have come across no evidence – in Scripture – or in history since – where this has happened. I say ‘has happened’. I could say ‘is happening’. And yet many want to say ‘will happen’ – thinking the apostle is making a prophecy about some future conversion of the Jews. This is quite wrong. Whatever Paul was referring to was going on in his own time and experience, even as he writes. If, therefore, he was saying that Jews, on seeing Gentiles converted, were moved to desire Christ for themselves, and to come to him, why didn’t he give ‘chapter and verse’ for it? What is more, the very same should have been going on down the centuries. It should be happening now. *But it was not, and is not!* Nor, as far as I know, is there any evidence that it has happened. Why not?

In short, I think it is, at the very least, debatable that Paul is saying that the Jews will be provoked to trust Christ. As for

¹⁴ Is this an example of Paul’s love of word play? The word for ‘transgression’ or ‘offence’ in the context is *paraptōma*.

¹⁵ Is this another example of Paul’s love of word play? The verb is *parorgizō*, ‘to rouse to wrath, to provoke, exasperate, anger’.

predicting it, as I have said he is not predicting anything. He is simply making a statement, stating a fact: ‘Salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious’. God’s purpose is evident: ‘Salvation [is] to the nations [Gentiles], for to provoke to jealousy them’. It was God’s purpose to make the Jews envious.

So how should we understand Romans 11:11? Let us assume that the better connotation should be put on ‘envy’. Very well. This seems to tie in with the use of the same word in verse 14 (even so, it clashes with its use in Romans 10:19). Nevertheless, since whichever way we take it, a change in the meaning of the word occurs somewhere between the three verses (Rom. 10:19; 11:11,14), let us assume that in verse 11 we should read the ‘jealousy’ in the positive sense. It best fits the apostle’s explanation: ‘Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery? Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious’ (Rom. 11:11). Paul did not say that Israel’s envious spirit (in a bad sense) meant that the gospel was taken to the Gentiles. No, it was through Israel’s stumbling that the gospel was taken to the Gentiles, and this ‘to make Israel envious’.

Even so, and bearing in mind the proviso that I have already mentioned,¹⁶ the apostle is still not (as so many like to think) making a prediction that God intends that the Jews will see the grace bestowed on the Gentiles and long for it themselves. As I say, whatever Paul is referring to was going on in his day, and I see no evidence that the Jews were moved, in Paul’s day, to conversion by longing for the same as the Gentiles. Nor have I come across any evidence of it since.

There is another possibility. When the apostle said: ‘Salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious’, if he was using ‘envious’ in the positive sense, I think it very likely that he was telling us of God’s desire, not his decree. Just as God sent the prophets to Israel in order to reclaim the people to his ways, but Israel refused,¹⁷ I think the apostle is saying that God *desires* the

¹⁶ That I see nothing of the sort in Scripture or history since.

¹⁷ Deut. 5:29; 30:15-20; 32:29; 2 Chron. 24:18-19; Ps. 81:8,11,13; Prov. 1:24-25; Isa. 48:18; 65:2,12; 66:4; Jer. 2:30; 3:7; 5:3; 44:4-5; Ezek. 18:23,30-32; 33:11; Zeph. 3:2,7, for instance.

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Jews to be provoked to trust Christ, but not necessarily that he has *decreed* it. It is possible that Paul is speaking in the spirit of, say, Luke 7:30; Acts 3:26:

The Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptised by John (Luke 7:30). When God raised up his servant [Jesus], he sent him first to you to bless you [the Jews] by turning each of you from your wicked ways (Acts 3:26).

God's 'purpose' for sending John to the Jews was that they might repent; that is, it was his desire. Likewise, God sent Christ in the preaching of the gospel (Eph. 2:17) to the Jews first, because he desired their conversion. But God's decree and his desire are not always one and the same.¹⁸ This would fit in admirably with Paul's own 'hopes' for the conversion of individual Jews. In particular, it would fit well with the context of Romans 9 – 11 (see Rom. 9:1-4; 10:1,21; 11:13-14).

But many, as I have said, show little restraint when commenting on this verse and what follows. They are dogmatic. They are prepared to say that the Jews, seeing God's blessing on the Gentiles, will long for it for themselves, and will turn to Christ in repentance and faith. In other words, Israel will be so provoked to envy, that they will be converted.

Did Paul *know* this? Did Paul *say* this? Has it happened? Is it happening? Is it certain that Israel will be converted? Is it not much nearer the mark to say that the apostle – in line with his stated purpose and confessed method (Rom. 11:13-14; 1 Cor. 9:19-23) – is doing all he can to arouse Jews to conversion, to stir them to come to Christ themselves? Indeed, at this point in his argument, I am sure that Paul is beginning to move into talking in terms of 'supposition', 'proposing of a case', putting the best construction on it, hoping 'by all possible means' (1 Cor. 9:22) to move as many Jews as possible, hoping to encourage as many Jews as possible to come to Christ.

And how well this fits Paul's overall purpose! The question which arises is not: 'Can Israel as a whole be saved?' No! Rather,

¹⁸ I have fully set out the argument for the twofold will of God in my *Offer*.

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it is: ‘Is Israel’s stumbling the end of the story? Does God have any larger purpose in it than that? Has Israel’s stumbling spelled utter and eternal ruin for every Jew?’ In other words: ‘Has Israel as a whole been rejected?’ ‘Certainly not!’, declares the apostle. And in saying this, he hopes to move as many of his fellow-Jews as possible to trust the Saviour. Indeed, that is why he says it!

Nevertheless, saying this is not enough for the apostle, as he goes on to argue. Jews *can* still be saved; Jews *will* be saved; Jews *are* being saved now. But, the fundamental issue, it must be remembered, is not whether *every* Jew might be saved, or will be saved in the future, but can *any* Jew be saved *now*?

Romans 11:12

But if their [the Jews’] transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!

When confronted with Christ and his gospel, the Jews, as a whole, sinned, trespassed, failed: they rejected Christ, and it spelled ‘their loss’. But this was not the end of the story. Oh, no! It was God’s way of opening the gospel to the Gentiles – riches for the world, riches for the Gentiles. Historically, this is how the gospel was taken to them, and continues to be taken to them now. The gospel was taken into Judaea and Samaria because of the Jewish persecution of the church at Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). And Jewish resistance to the gospel played its part in ensuring the gospel reached the Gentiles at Pisidian Antioch:

When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: ‘We had to speak the word of God to you first.¹⁹ Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: “I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth”’. When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed. The word of the Lord spread through the whole region (Acts 13:45-49).

¹⁹ See also Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8; 3:26; 10:36; 13:26; Rom. 1:16; 2:9-10.

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Again, at Corinth:

When the Jews opposed Paul and became abusive, he shook out his clothes in protest and said to them: ‘Your blood be on your own heads! I am clear of my responsibility. From now on I will go to the Gentiles’ (Acts 18:6).

And at Ephesus:

Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them became obstinate; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way. So Paul left them. He took the disciples with him and had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord (Acts 19:8-10).

Even so, we must not get carried away. When Paul (in Romans 11:12) speaks of ‘the Gentiles’, when he talks of ‘riches for the world’, ‘riches for the Gentiles’, he does not mean riches for every individual Gentile, of course; he speaks of riches for Gentiles as Gentiles, Gentiles as a people. He does not mean that every Gentile will be saved – nor even that Gentiles will be saved in large numbers. Similarly, when he speaks of the salvation of Israel, he does not mean that every Israelite will be saved. This must be borne in mind as we go on.

So far so good. Then follows the apostle’s intriguing question: ‘If the Jews’ loss spelled riches for the Gentiles, how much more their – that is, the Jews’ – fullness?’ Literally: ‘But if their offence wealth of world, and their default wealth of nations, how much more their fullness’.

What is Paul doing here in verse 12? Notice what he is *not* doing. He is *not* making a categorical statement. He is posing a question. ***Or is he?*** Note the exclamation mark in the NIV. The exclamation mark, as all punctuation, has been supplied, as it had to be. I am happy that the translators have used the ‘!’ and not the ‘?’. I think Paul’s words fit somewhere in between an exclamation and a rhetorical question. But even if he does ask a question – which I am sure he does not – he asks a question *which he does not answer*. Most definitely, he is *not* saying the Jews *will* have a fullness. There is no verb in the ‘how much more their fullness’. I

know it is usually assumed that ‘will be’ must be supplied, but is this necessarily so? What if ‘would be’ is supplied?²⁰ If the Jews’ loss means so much for the Gentiles, how much more would their fullness mean? I am not saying ‘will be’ is wrong; I merely show that dogmatism is out of place. Furthermore, it is quite wrong to insert a conjecture, a gloss, *and then go on to turn that gloss into a categorical deduction*, leading to a *resounding assertion* with enormous consequences.

As I say, ‘would be’ is an alternative insertion. I go further. In the context, ‘would be’ is far more in keeping with Paul’s limited and restrained purpose in trying to awaken Jews and encourage as many of them as possible to be saved.

And what is this ‘fullness’? It is the opposite of ‘loss’. The two Greek words in question in Romans 11 are *plērōma*: ‘that which fills, that which by a loss is repaired’, and *hēttēma*: ‘a diminution, decrease, defeat, loss’. While the word *plērōma* is often taken to mean a huge number of converts from among the Jews, this would not seem to be Paul’s point here. Moreover, it would run counter to his heavy emphasis upon the remnant, not only here, but throughout the context (Romans 9 – 11). In Romans 11:12, the apostle does not compare a small number of converts to a large number, but loss to fullness. So I ask again: What is this ‘fullness’? It can mean one of two things. It can mean either ‘completeness’ or ‘full number’ – see Romans 11:25 (NIV, NKJV).

‘Completeness’ is probably – almost certainly – the better translation here. The Jews’ loss meant blessing for the Gentiles; how much more their completeness. But as to ‘fullness’, I do not object to the idea of numbers. Putting the two ideas together, when the apostle talks of the ‘fullness’ of the Jews, the conversion of ‘the full number, the complete number, of the elect among the Jews’ is a strong possibility. As I say, compare: ‘The full number of the Gentiles’ (Rom. 11:25).

But what if the ‘completeness’ of Israel refers to the fulfilment of God’s design for Israel? He had chosen Israel as a nation and blessed her (Rom. 9:4-5). Could her ‘completeness’ be speaking of the full realisation for the nation in God’s plan to use Israel for the

²⁰ Or ‘might be’.

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furtherance of the gospel, the ‘completion’ of that plan? It is possible. And if it is, then, of course, Paul is saying nothing whatsoever about conversions among the Jews, let alone a massive number of conversions.

Now, whatever this ‘completeness’ is, even if it is speaking of the conversion of the full number of the elect among the Jews, what we have here is an example of Paul using ‘any means to provoke to jealousy those who are [his] flesh and save some of them’ (Rom. 11:14). Not only is he informing Gentile believers as to the *possibility* of fellow-Jews being saved, he is at the same time (and by design) encouraging Jews to be saved. He is assuring the Gentiles (and yet again, but by design, the Jews) that the Jews have not sinned themselves beyond hope; they can yet be saved. Indeed, as he argues, since Israel’s failure has led to so much blessing to the world, whatever would it be like if they came to faith? If Israel’s rejection of Christ has brought such blessing to the Gentiles, what might happen if Jews turned to Christ, and received him as Saviour and Lord? The Jews must not allow themselves to think they cannot come to Christ, that they are beyond hope. God in his sovereignty has overruled their disobedience; think how he might use their obedience!

Even so, far too much can be read into Paul’s speculative²¹ question or (as I am sure it is) exclamation; his main purpose must not be forgotten. And that purpose is clear: the Gentiles must not think the Jews have sinned themselves beyond salvation. Nor, of course, must Jews allow themselves to think anything of the kind. But Paul is *not* predicting that the Jews will be converted in massive numbers. Indeed, he is not predicting anything at all! Nor is he speaking in apocalyptic terms. The problem was not that the Gentiles needed to be told that God was going to convert a huge number of Jews at the end of the age; they were thinking that God would not – perhaps, could not – convert *any* Jew *now*. How wrong could they be!

Consequently, I don’t agree with those who suggest (when commenting on this verse) that the number of Jewish converts will increase to such an extent that ‘the remnant’ becomes ‘the

²¹ I intend nothing pejorative in using this word.

majority'. If this were to be right, it would seem to me, the apostle has taken his own categorical assertions about 'the remnant', and blown them right out of the water. It's worse. Such a view leads to a dogmatism and an optimism that seems way beyond what the apostle is suggesting. How is it possible that such a massive optimism is utterly absent in all the apostle's other writings? He speaks of Israel on countless occasions, yet he never once (unless this is the sole exception) talks in terms of a massive conversion-rate among them. How can this be, seeing it would be of such massive importance, something to glory in, both for the Jews themselves, and for the world as a consequence?

Romans 11:13-14

I am talking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy²² and save some of them.

These verses form an aside, an explanatory parenthesis, in the apostle's argument – an important aside, nevertheless. In fact, it is a key passage for the understanding of Romans 11. Note Paul's desire. It is to see as many Jews as possible converted to Christ. Again, note the apostle's hesitancy. There is no evidence here of that massive confidence displayed by so many – that Jews in huge numbers will be saved. The NIV is excellent: 'In the hope that, somehow... some of them'. Paul shows a modest and muted approach to the salvation of Jews. Take this use of: 'Save some of them'. Note the unmistakable parallel with 'that by all possible means I might save *some*' (1 Cor. 9:22). All this is right in line with 'the remnant' concept underlying Romans 9 – 11, whereas the huge and dogmatic claims which so many build on 'all Israel' do not fit it at all. It is hard to see how a mass conversion of the nation of Israel can sit easily with the idea of 'the remnant', and with 'some of them', 'in the hope that', 'somehow', 'might' – all of them muted terms.

But many are willing – eager! – with almost unbridled confidence, to predict a massive conversion of Israel.²³ But what

²² I take the 'envy' here to be positive – see the earlier discussion on Rom. 10:19; 11:11,14.