

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*

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'.

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

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; 1Tim. 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).

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.

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.

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

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?

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.

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*.

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.

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’.

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.

Paul actually says is: ‘If by any means (*ei pōs*) I may provoke... and save some of them’ (Rom. 11:14, NKJV).²⁴ Paul is far more restrained than the triumphalists say he is. He uses *ei pōs*, as he did when praying that it might be possible ‘if by some means’ (*ei pōs*) for him to travel to Rome (Rom. 1:10, NKJV); as did Luke when describing how the travellers wanted to try, if possible, ‘if by any means (*ei pōs*) they could reach Phoenix’ (Acts 27:12, NKJV).²⁵ The NIV rightly has it that Paul was hoping that some way ‘may be opened’ for him to get to Rome, and the travellers were ‘hoping to reach Phoenix’; that is, he was hoping, wishing, would like it to happen. Any note of confidence is remarkable only for its absence.

The same goes for his stated desire (in Romans 11:13-14) that the Jews might be provoked to envy. The proper note is one of hesitation, ‘in the hope that, perhaps’. And when Paul speaks of magnifying his ministry, surely he is using every justifiable argument he can lay his hands on, hoping that he might bring about his desire for as many Jews as possible; namely, their conversion (Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1). Nevertheless, he still speaks with restraint, using the word ‘some’. Many commentators show no such restraint. In fact, they go overboard, ending up triumphalists.

Yet again, it is not unknown for such commentators to introduce a further unwarranted note of certainty, one strikingly absent in Paul, when they claim the apostle speaks in glowing terms about his Gentile ministry, using its ‘success’ to awaken the Jews. Let me look at this, and in several respects.

For a start, where, in this context, does Paul speak of the ‘success’ of his ministry? He ‘magnifies’ it, yes, he makes much of it, ‘by the most devoted administration of it endeavouring to convert as many Gentiles as possible to Christ’, but ‘success’? Paul is simply saying that he has worked hard in the ministry to which

²³ As we have seen, some go so far as to say that the salvation of the Gentiles is *intended* to provoke and move the Israelites to faith and repentance, that God has *planned* to save Jews in such numbers that the Gentiles will be spiritually enriched beyond all previous experience.

²⁴ *ei pōs*: ‘if in any way, if by any means, if possibly’, ‘if perhaps, if somehow’.

²⁵ I know *ei pōs* might mean something stronger under certain circumstances (Phil. 3:11), but the context determines, as it does here.

Christ has called him, and he knows he has been greatly honoured to be given such a privilege. But the apostle is rightly modest: he is not blowing his own trumpet. He knows full well that his ministry among the Gentiles has not been one long success story, but in setting out the record, all he hopes to do is to move ‘some’ Jews to come to Christ. Nothing here about massive success among the Gentiles producing a huge awakening among the Jews!

The fact that Christ honoured him so much by giving him a ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15) Paul always regarded as an unspeakable privilege for one who deserved nothing but the Lord’s wrath. The apostle valued his ministry immensely, and it was a subject on which he never grew tired of expatiating (Acts 22:21; 26:16-18; Rom. 1:5; 15:16-20; Gal. 1:16; 2:1-10; Eph. 3:1-13; 1 Thess. 2:16; 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 4:17). But success among the Gentiles leading to an awakening among the Jews? Where? Compare the way he expressed himself when writing to the Thessalonians: ‘You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure’; ‘you believed our testimony to you’ (1 Thess. 2:1; 2 Thess. 1:10). A very different tone, is it not?

But doesn’t Paul boast about his ministry elsewhere? He does indeed! He even does it in Romans (but not here in chapter 11):

I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done – by the power of signs and miracles through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation... This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you (Rom. 15:15-22).

I draw attention to the following pertinent facts: Paul certainly boasts here about the success of his ministry to the Gentiles, but there is not the slightest suggestion that he does this to encourage or provoke the Jews to their conversion. Note also the hint he gives

as to the reason for his boasting. I can detect a strong sense of defence in his words. Why should he need to defend himself? Because he was always being attacked over his ministry, and he constantly needed to restate his authority as an apostle (Rom. 1:1,5; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1, for instance). Nowhere is this more evident than in 2 Corinthians 3:1-6,12; 4:1-15; 10:12 – 13:6.²⁶ When he was being attacked by law mongers, Paul would glory in his ministry, his apostleship, his direct commission by Christ, and his success, but I know of no instance where he boasts about his success among the Gentiles in order to stir Jews to jealousy.

But the triumphalists, having got the bit between their teeth, drive on regardless. Paul's modest 'hope' or 'wish', they turn into certainty. '*If by any means I may provoke... and save some of them*' (that which Paul wrote) becomes the definite, the dogmatic, '*so that*'. These glosses do untold damage to our understanding of what Paul actually wrote. The NIV is much better: 'In the hope that I may somehow arouse... and save some of them'.

Even here we need to be cautious: 'hope' in Scripture often means 'confident expectation'. But Paul does not even use the word 'hope' here! It is not in the Greek. Why not? Moreover, while the NIV uses 'hope', it does so only in our modern, watered-down sense of the word, in line with what Paul actually says; namely, that he 'wished or longed that fellow-Jews might be saved' – not confidently predicted it! Let me give you the literal rendering of the apostle's words: 'My services I glorify if by any means I shall provoke to jealousy my flesh and shall save some from among them'. This is a far cry from any note of certainty and talk of 'success'.

As I have explained, *ei pōs* means 'if in any way, if by any means, if possibly', 'if perhaps, if somehow'. What a difference between what the apostle actually says and that which the triumphalist teachers make him say. How much these teachers build on a non-existent word in the text. They are not making a mountain out of a mole-hill; they are building a castle in the air!

²⁶ See also 1 Cor. 4:1,14-21. See my *Glorious*.

Romans 11:15

For if their [the Jews'] rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

This verse follows on from, and is similar to, Paul's argument in verse 12: he is hoping he might be able to stimulate the Jews to call upon the name of the Lord for salvation. Because of their trespass, the Jews have stumbled (Rom. 11:8,17), the kingdom has been taken from them (Matt. 21:43), and this has led to blessing for the Gentiles, 'the reconciliation of the world' (Rom. 11:15);²⁷ the Gentiles have been brought in. Paul follows this, as he did before (Rom. 11:12), with the corresponding supposition or proposition: 'What will [the Jews'] acceptance be but life from the dead?' (Rom. 11:15).

Note once again, as in verse 12, how Paul now (in verse 15) makes no categorical statement to the effect that Israel *will* be taken back or 'accepted'; as before, he uses no verb. This is what he actually writes: 'For if their casting away reconciliation of world what the reception except life from among dead?' Just as 'how much more their fullness' (verse 12) is often understood as 'how much more *will* their fullness be', so 'what the acceptance (reception)' (verse 15) is often understood as 'what *will* their acceptance (reception) be'. But as above, what if Paul intends us to read it as 'would be'? It certainly fits the thrust of his argument. Is he not speculating, musing aloud, arguing that Jews can be saved, indeed will be saved? Is he not trying to bring this about for as many Jews as possible, using every means, every encouragement he can lay his hands on? Does he not hope that his fellow-Jews will, as it were, overhear him and respond? Has he not just said so, and said it with unmistakable clarity? What do I mean? Just this: '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

²⁷ Here is another example of that earlier important point of interpretation. Paul is not saying that 'all the world' – literally – is reconciled or 'received'. Nor is he saying that every Gentile is or will be reconciled; Paul is speaking in general terms. This must be borne in mind when we get to grips with 'all Israel' later on. See also John 1:29; 4:42; Col. 1:20; 1 Tim. 4:10; 1 John 2:2; 4:14.

somehow arouse my own people to envy and save some of them' (Rom. 11:13-14).

So if it is that the apostle does in fact say: 'How much more their fullness *would be*... What *would be* their acceptance?', is he not doing precisely what he said he would do? *And only that?* Those who use these verses to build the edifice of a massive conversion of the Jews are pushing Paul's words far beyond what is warranted. The foundation is far too flimsy to bear the weight of the claim.

What is this life from the dead? Certainly not the general resurrection of the dead. Not at all! Rejecting that, some think Paul was predicting – note the definite word – a massive revival among the Gentiles, the world-wide expansion and success of the gospel. This, of course, leads to the illogical conclusion that Paul is supposed to be predicting a huge number of conversions throughout the world – when (and after) the fullness of both Jews and Gentiles has already been accomplished.²⁸ The notion, therefore, is illogical at best. What can remain after 'fullness'? A great revival? Then again, does Paul predict anything here? Where? And, yet again, I ask, how can we expect this unprecedented number of conversions *after* the fullness of both Jews and Gentiles has been reached? Who is left to be converted? And all this stems, remember, from a gloss inserted into the text; namely 'will be'.

No! 'Life from the dead' is a metaphor, almost a proverb, meaning 'unimaginable blessing'. 'We were like those who dream' (Ps. 126:1-3). It has nothing to with the apocalyptic, which many try to read into the passage. It is not here. Paul is saying that since such blessing came to the Gentiles (namely, the taking of the gospel to them) when the Jews rejected Christ, imagine what joy it would bring, it must bring, to the Gentiles *if* Jews came to Christ – as it does, of course, even today.

In all this, it is impossible to miss the way the apostle is trying to move Jews to come to Christ, trying to encourage them to turn to the Lord.

²⁸ See below.

Romans 11:16-24

If the part of the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, then the whole batch is holy; if the root is holy, so are the branches. If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then: 'Branches were broken off so that I could be grafted in'. Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!

We now come to Paul's two illustrations: the lump of dough and the olive tree. We must be clear: these illustrations speak of what Paul has been saying, of what is going on now, in 'the present age' (Rom. 11:5), not of some future event connected with the return of Christ. The main points stand out, at least in the case of the tree. And when considering the olive tree, let us bear in mind that, while Paul strains his illustration to the limit, he is not writing a textbook on the culture of olives! As with all illustrations, the main point must be grasped, and peripheral issues must not be pushed to ridiculous lengths.

Note the contrast – which is permanent – between God's goodness to the elect and his severity to those who fell: 'Consider... the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you' (Rom. 11:22). Note the parallel with Romans 9:18-24, where Paul uses the illustration of the potter and the two sorts of vessels to make the same point:

God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy, and he hardens whom he wants to harden... What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath – prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the

riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles?

As to the olive tree (Rom. 11:16-24), to be ‘cut off’ from the tree is to be forever severed and distinct from the elect and so to be eternally condemned. The Jews who were cut off were those non-elect Jews who, though they had been Jews by birth, in truth had never been part of the tree. They stumbled *and* fell. And this was irreversible. Paul’s point is, however, if any Jew comes to faith he will be grafted in again. In other words, at this point the apostle is speaking from the sinner’s point of view – that is, if the sinner will believe he will be grafted in. He is not speaking from God’s point of view, God’s decree – that is, whether or not he has elected that particular sinner.

Moreover, Paul is certainly not speaking of a restoration of Israel to its position under the old covenant. As I have explained, Christ has fulfilled and abolished the old covenant, rendering it obsolete. Israel’s special place within that covenant – which existed only within that covenant – is gone, therefore, and can never be restored. The olive tree does not speak of any such restoration.

As for the lump of dough, the first portion of that lump (that is, Abraham) is ‘holy’; so, as a consequence, the whole lump is holy. Drawing on the olive tree illustration for a moment, if bits of dough are broken off, how easy it is to mix them back into the lump again. If Gentiles are being saved, and added to the lump,²⁹ as they are, how much more natural or easier would it be – is it – for Jews to be saved. In saying this, keep in mind Paul’s stated purpose to arouse his fellow-Jews to conversion.

As for the ‘firstfruits’, alas, far too much can be read into this, and then read out of it. It is frequently done. No! Paul is simply citing the sacrificial practice under the law; he is not arguing for the conversion of the nation after that of the ‘firstfruits’ or remnant! Paul certainly does not develop his allusion in that way.

²⁹ The illustration must not be pushed too far. ‘The lump’ was complete in God’s eternal decree.

Now for the olive tree. First, the root. While Paul does not specify who (or what) this 'root' is, and while various suggestions have been made for the role, I am convinced the root is Abraham. It most definitely is *not* Israel. Both Israel and Gentiles are merely branches. Israel is neither the root nor the tree. Gentiles are not grafted onto Israel. Believers, both Jewish and Gentile, make one tree with Abraham as its root. As they come to faith, the elect are grafted onto Abraham, they become the children, seed or offspring of Abraham. As Paul declared on more than one occasion, setting it all out in detail:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter?... We have been saying that Abraham's faith was credited to him as righteousness. Under what circumstances was it credited? Was it after he was circumcised, or before? It was not after, but before! And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. So then, he is the father of all who believe but have not been circumcised, in order that righteousness might be credited to them. And he is also the father of the circumcised who not only are circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised... Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring – not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations'. He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed... Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him: 'So shall your offspring be'... The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness – for us [whether Jew or Gentile] who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (Rom. 4:1-25).

Consider Abraham: 'He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'. Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you'. So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree'. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles

through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit... You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were [spiritually] baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:6-9,13-14,26-29).

For [Christ] himself is our peace, who has made the two [believing Jews and Gentiles] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Eph. 2:14-22).

Coming back to the olive tree, when Paul states: 'If the root is holy, so are the branches' (Rom. 11:16), he is not saying that every Jew is holy in the sense of being saved.³⁰ Of course not! As I have explained elsewhere,³¹ Abraham has two lines of descent; the physical and the spiritual. All his physical seed are connected to Abraham physically; all his spiritual seed are connected to him spiritually. A man may be a natural Israelite (that is, be connected to Abraham physically) and yet be lost (that is, not be connected to Abraham spiritually); a man may be a Gentile (that is, not connected to Abraham physically) and yet be saved (that is, connected to Abraham spiritually).

As for the spiritual seed of Abraham, they, being joined to the root, carry the sap from the root. In other words, all Abraham's spiritual seed are truly joined to him, whether they were by birth Jew or Gentile. Just because a man is a Jew it does not mean he is

³⁰ Any more than 1 Cor. 7:14 teaches that every child of every believer is saved.

³¹ See my *Infant*.

truly, spiritually, connected to the root (Rom. 9:6). Only believers are connected to Abraham spiritually (Rom. 4:11-25; Gal. 3:6-9,14,26-29), but all believers are the children of Abraham; they are the children of the promise (Rom. 4:16; 9:7-8; Gal. 3:18,29; 4:28; see also Heb. 11:8-12).

Now for the illustration of the branches being broken off. This must not be pushed too far: no true believer can lose his salvation. The elect are *never* cut off. The illustration must not be stretched beyond Paul's intended limits. Paul is speaking – as before – in general terms. In the old covenant, Israel had a special place and was (in some sense) connected to Abraham. But, even in those days of the old covenant, not all Israelites were truly (spiritually) joined to Abraham; only the elect among them were. And when Christ came, Israel as a whole rejected him and so fell: they, as a people, as a nation, stumbled, were defeated, suffered loss. The Jews were offered the gospel, and offered it first, but, alas, they as a whole rejected it, and so, in God's sovereign grace, in God's purpose, it was taken to the Gentiles. And they – that is, the elect among them – receiving Christ, to this day are being grafted into the tree, and so to Abraham. This, it goes without saying, spells untold riches for the Gentiles, the reconciling of the world – not, of course, that every Gentile is being saved, or will be saved (nor that every Jew is to be damned).³² What it does mean is that all the elect – whether Jew or Gentile – are united to Abraham, spiritually speaking; every believer – whether Jew or Gentile – is a spiritual child of Abraham.

Having said that, Paul goes on immediately to use his illustration to smite down any smugness on the part of the Gentiles, warning them that what has happened to Israel can happen to them. Indeed, history is replete with proof of it. How many places in the world that once had the light of the gospel have lost it? Take the churches of Revelation 2 – 3; take the churches of Asia Minor, North Africa. Where are they now? They are gone! Are we at

³² Do not force the illustration! If the illustration is forced in the case of Israel, the same must be done for the Gentiles. It also means that believers can be cut off. As always, look for the one main lesson in any parable, allegory or illustration, and stick with *that*.

present witnessing a repeat of the same in the UK, if not in the west generally? I think so.

Keep in mind Paul's motive and attitude in all this. As before, in Romans 11:23-24, he now expresses his confidence in God's power (not forgetting his willingness) to save Jews: 'And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again. After all, if you [Gentiles] were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches, be grafted into their own olive tree!' But in saying this, the apostle certainly does not assert that Jews will be converted in droves. He certainly is not making a categorical prediction that it will be so! He has been given no such assurance. He is much more modest: 'If they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again'. It *can* happen; *not* that it most definitely will happen.

What Paul is doing is to convince the Gentiles that they must not make the mistake of thinking that the Jews are beyond recall. In addition, he has not lost sight of his stated purpose: he is doing all he can to encourage hope among the Jews that they can be saved, and to stir them to call on the name of Christ, whereupon they will be saved; hence, the 'how much more'. But this last must not be pushed – as it often is – pushed and stretched to ridiculous lengths, far beyond the analogy of Scripture.³³ The Jews are not more saveable because they are Jews! See Romans 3:22-23,29-30; 10:11-13.

Indeed, all this helps us understand the apostle's earlier uses of 'how much greater' or 'how much more'. The real question which ought to be asked is not: Can Jews be saved? but: Can *Gentiles* be saved? The latter is more amazing than the former. Let the Gentiles get a grip on that! And let the Jew be melted and moved to come to Christ by the thought!

Can Jews be saved? Can Gentiles be saved? The answer is the same in both cases. *Can* be saved? God *will* save his elect. The fact

³³ As the Westminster Confession puts it: 'The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture, it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly'.

is, there is only one people of God. Whether Jews or Gentiles, sinners need to be converted, joined spiritually to the root, and so demonstrate they are Abraham's spiritual seed. This is open to Gentiles and still open to Jews. They only have to believe in Christ for salvation.

Romans 11:25-27

I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved, as it is written: 'The deliverer will come from Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins'.

In the lead-up to this passage, some commentators, having already shown a high degree of unjustified dogmatic optimism, now let their imagination run riot. With unmitigated confidence they predict 'the restoration of Israel', even 'the salvation of the nation as a whole'. Salvation of the nation as a whole? If 'restoration' was a step too far, whatever should we make of 'the salvation of the entire nation'? And if this is right, then, of course, it can only be the very point to which all salvation history has been pointing and leading. This has been God's eternal purpose all down the centuries – the salvation of the entire nation of Israel!

But is the 'climax' of salvation history 'the salvation of Israel'? Really? Are we to understand that from eternity past, all through salvation history, everything has been leading to this one great end, this one great climax; namely, the salvation of Israel? How does this square with the rest of the post-Pentecost sacred writings? If this really is the climax of salvation history, shouldn't we meet it everywhere in the post-Pentecost Scriptures?

Triumphalists, however, are adept at taking away with one hand that which they have given with the other. Despite their confidence, such teachers vacillate between 'the salvation of the nation of Israel as a whole' and 'the salvation of great numbers of Jews'. There is a difference!

But whichever it is, I cannot believe my eyes! This really is too much, and by a long chalk. Such confidence does not fit easily with the deduction Paul has just made concerning the olive tree;

namely, Jews ‘*can be* grafted back in again’. We must not turn Paul’s ‘can be’ into a dogmatic ‘will be’, and, even more dogmatic, ‘will be in great numbers at the end of the age’, even ‘the salvation of the nation as a whole’. This really is inflation at work – and with a vengeance!

Why not let Paul state his own purpose? And why not simply accept what he tells us? He explained that he did not want his Gentile readers to become ‘conceited’ (Rom. 11:25). To judge by those who read a massive world-wide awakening out of the apostle’s words, one would think Paul was hoping his readers would not become depressed; in other words, he wanted them to be elated, even ecstatic. Thus, many are prepared to make the apostle speak in the most elevated and inflated of terms, when he himself was doing nothing of the sort, nor did he intend to. He told us what he was doing. Let us not invent a purpose for him, or force one on him.

We know what Paul is saying. He tells us. He spells out ‘the mystery’. By ‘mystery’ the apostle means something which was always true but is only now made known to us, and that by direct revelation through an apostle. The mystery in question is not that Israel will be converted as a nation; they never will be! The mystery is that ‘Israel has experienced a hardening (blindness) in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved’. The mystery is not that all Israel will be saved; rather, it is that *in this way* all Israel will be saved.

This being such a vital point, and one which is so often badly misunderstood, let me make the issue as clear as I can. A common objection to the view I am putting forward runs something like this: ‘The salvation of all Israel – all the elect in Israel – is no mystery! It’s a truism!’ I agree. So it is. That is to say, it is a truism if we are fully committed – as I most definitely am – to the view that God’s decrees can never fail or be thwarted, but always must be accomplished. But, do not forget, this is the very point at issue in Romans 9 – 11: ‘It is not as though God’s word had failed’ (Rom. 9:6). Working on that basis – as the apostle does, and so do I! – the fact that all the elect (whether Jew or Gentile) will be saved is a truism. A glorious truism, certainly, but a truism, all the same.

But then, I have never said the salvation of the elect (whether Jew or Gentile) is a mystery. Nor did Paul. The apostle declares that Israel's partial hardening has meant that the gospel was taken to the Gentiles, and it is in that way that God brings about the conversion and salvation of the elect among the Gentiles. But, as God is calling his elect from among the Gentiles, he is, of course, at the same time, calling his elect from among the Jews. Hence Paul's talk of the 'partial hardening' among the Jews. And the mystery is that it is in this way that God saves all his elect (Jew and Gentile); but here, in particular, it is in this way that God saves all the elect in Israel. In other words, that which appears to be a disaster – the general rejection of the gospel by Jews – God uses and overrules for his wider and further purpose, including the salvation of Jews, ultimately turning it all to his glory. This is the additional revelation which Paul has been setting out throughout the chapter, not the conversion of the nation.

Paul wrote Romans 11 to prove that despite Israel's fall, God has not responded by going back on his election of the remnant from among them. This may not have been a mystery, but it certainly shows yet again the amazing grace of God. At least some Gentile believers entertained some doubts about it! The mystery is the interplay between Jews and Gentiles, and the use God makes of this to further his plan in saving all the elect, including all the elect among Israel, despite the unspeakable wickedness of their attitude and actions towards the Son of his love.

Remember what the apostle said elsewhere:

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen (Rom. 16:25-27).

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.³⁴ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory (Eph. 3:1-13).

The commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness – the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge... Pray for us... that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone (Col. 1:25 – 2:3; 4:3-6).

And so here. Israel is hardened in part – but only in part: some Jews are being saved. This hardening has an end point: it will last 'until the full number of the Gentiles has come in'. But nothing

³⁴ The 'mystery' is not that Jews and Gentiles will be saved. Rather: '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. 3:6).

whatsoever is said about the hardness being removed once that end point has been reached. *That* has to be read into the text. Let me repeat that; it is crucial: the notion that hardened Jews can be saved has to be inserted into the text. Paul did not say it. Indeed, as I have explained, this hardness can never be removed. There is no possibility that the hardened (in this context) can be turned into the elect. Just as the elect can never be damned, the hardened (in this context) can never be converted. So if it *is* argued that Paul was saying that the hardness of the Jews *is* removed when the fullness or full number of the Gentiles comes in, this must mean that God will alter his decree – which is unthinkable.

Not only so. Taking this fullness (or full number) to be the same as before – completion, the conversion of the full number of the elect – it can only mean that from a certain point in time every Jew will be saved – since there will be no more hardness in Israel – while no more Gentiles will be saved – since they will have reached their fullness. Do the triumphalist teachers believe this? Do they envisage a time when all the elect among the Gentiles will have been saved, and every last Jew from that time on will be saved?

Of course not! So what does Paul mean? Israel is going to be partially hardened right to the end of the age – until the full number of the Gentiles has come in. That is, God will, throughout this age, gather his elect from among the Jews and Gentiles, and he will go on doing so until every last one of the elect is converted. And when that happens, it will signal the end of the age.

Just a minute! Look again at the word ‘until’. Is it not true that most of the occasions on which this word is used in Scripture (25 times out of 37), ‘until’ means something occurs until a certain time, at which point that ‘something’ will come to an end, circumstances will change, and the new situation will take over? Yes, this is true. And if the frequency of use settles the matter, then it does indeed mean that hardened Jews will become elect Jews. But the frequency of use is not the determining factor in deciding the meaning of ‘until’ here. The permanent judgemental concept of hardening must be kept in mind. In fact, this permanent nature of ‘the hardening’ is paramount. As I have explained, ‘to be hardened’ is the opposite of ‘to be elected’. Paul was not saying

the majority of Jews were hardened until a certain time, and *then* elected. He could not possibly say that. Election and hardening (in this context) are mutually exclusive; both are irreversible or irrevocable – Paul’s very word: ‘As far as election is concerned... God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable’ (Rom. 11:28-29). Election took place in eternity past. A second sort of election will not – cannot – take place at some point during this age. What is more, no elect person is ever described as once being hardened in this judicial sense, for the simple reason that election and hardening (in this sense) are direct opposites. To say it yet again, they are mutually exclusive.

Summary of the triumphalist view

Let me gather this together. If the triumphalist view is right, in Romans 11:11-12 we have the following:

The Jews’ failure → Gentile riches → Jews provoked to salvation. When the Jews reach their fullness (complete number to be saved) → unspecified but implied massive blessing for Gentiles. It must be massive since the Gentiles have already received riches.

The logic is repeated in Romans 11:15:

The Jews were rejected → the reconciling of the world → (not specified but must be understood) the Jews’ acceptance (which by the parallel can only mean their fullness or full number) → unspecified but massive blessing for the Gentiles. It must be massive since it is described as life from the dead, and is more than their reconciliation, since that has already occurred.

Now, in Romans 11:25, we have:

Israel partly hardened until → the conversion of the full number of the elect among the Gentiles → the conversion of the full number of the elect in Israel; indeed, all Israel will be saved – since their hardening has been completely removed.

Putting all this together, it proves too much, far too much.

Hardening of Israel → the conversion of the full number of the elect among the Gentiles → the conversion of the full number of the elect in Israel → unmitigated blessing.

But since we are talking in terms of conversion, this last unmitigated blessing must be in terms of even more conversions. But who is left to be converted? All the elect among the Jews and all the elect among the Gentiles, the fullness or full number of both, have by this time been converted. So, I ask again, who is left to be converted?

Some triumphalists avoid this difficulty only by substituting ‘unprecedented blessing’ at this point for the ‘fullness’ of the Gentiles, and saying that this unprecedented blessing (fullness) does not exclude even greater blessing to follow. Really? Something more than this ‘fullness’? The word for ‘fullness’, *plērōma*, speaks of the baskets filled after the miracles (Mark 6:43; 8:20). And Paul said ‘fullness’ or ‘full number’. Moreover, ‘fullness’ means ‘completeness’. So the fundamental illogicality at the heart of the triumphalist interpretation remains. What greater blessing can come after completeness? What can come after ‘fullness’? The baskets were full; they could contain no more. And note how Paul spoke of ‘*the* fullness’, ‘*the* full number’, not simply some vague sort of ‘fullness’.

In any case, the triumphalist view, based upon Paul’s exclamation,³⁵ relying upon verbs which have to be supplied, is all so far removed from Paul’s *stated* reason for writing the chapter, and his modest hesitant language at various key points, that it cannot possibly be right. In verse 25, the apostle is not talking about the removal of the hardness of Israel and their conversion as a whole, the conversion of Israel as a nation. It is utterly wrong to grab this verse out of context. We must keep in mind the theme of the entire chapter – indeed, the whole section, Romans 9 – 11. And this theme, beyond all doubt, is not ‘the restoration of Israel’. Paul has not been arguing for that throughout this section of Romans. Not at all! Rather, Paul’s theme – his burden – in verse 25 is precisely what it has been all along; namely, to convince Gentiles that, despite their appalling track record, Jews can be saved, and will be saved. Moreover, Paul stresses this in order to move as many of his fellow-Jews as possible to come to Christ. God’s purpose in election will never fail, the apostle declares. God’s

³⁵ In verse 12, even if Paul asks a question, it remains unanswered.

purpose can never fail (Rom. 9:6), and that purpose includes the saving of Jews. And Paul sets this out, using all the power at his disposal, all the arguments he can lay his hands on, in order to encourage as many of his fellow-Jews as possible to come to Christ. This has been the apostle's aim throughout. And it stays the same here. Paul has not switched intentions (and doing so without making it clear).

The point is, 'and so all Israel will be saved' (Rom. 11:26), does not mean that 'after all this has happened (that is, after all the interplay between Jews and Gentiles in God's plan of salvation history has been worked out), at that stage or moment in time, *then* all Israel will be saved', but '*in this manner* all Israel will be saved', and saved throughout the present age. *This* is the mystery – not that 'all Israel will be saved', but that '*in this way* all Israel will be saved'. The time element – which is so important to teachers of the triumphalist school – the time element, in the sense of a particular stage or moment at the end of the age, must not be dragged in here. Time is involved in every process, of course, but the emphasis here is upon the 'manner', the 'way' in which all Israel will be saved, not the 'when'. Indeed, Paul's use of *houtōs*, 'so', bears this out. Thayer speaks of: 'In this manner, thus, so'; he ascribes no temporal meaning to the word. It is a question of manner.

As for the time in question, the apostle is referring to this present age, 'the present time' (Rom. 11:5), throughout this age, now. Paul is not speaking of an explosion of conversions among the Jews at the end of the age. He is not speaking of a limited time round about the second coming of Christ. Rather he is setting out the way in which God, throughout this age, will call Jews into Jesus Christ and so bring them to salvation.

The real question here is as to the meaning of 'Israel'. Does it mean 'the elect, Jew and Gentile', or 'ethnic Israel'? Not the former. While I have great sympathy with this interpretation – since it is true that all the elect (both Jew and Gentile) will be saved, and they will be saved in this way³⁶ – it is not Paul's point in this passage. Gentiles do not come into this at all; to bring them

³⁶ And it is the interpretation adopted by some great teachers, Calvin included.

in at this point runs counter to the apostle's purpose. In Romans 9 – 11, Paul has used 'Israel' ten times so far, and not once has he meant 'the elect, Jew and Gentile'. He has always been speaking about Jews, Israel as a people, Israel as a nation, Jews as distinct from Gentiles. And he continues to speak in this same way through the rest of the chapter. In Romans 11:26, therefore, he means Israel as distinct from Gentiles.

But care is needed. We must not forget what Paul has already established. In Romans 9:6, Paul clearly distinguished between ethnic Israel and elect Israel: 'Not all who are descended from Israel are [elect] Israel', or: 'They are not all [elect] Israel who are [ethnic] Israel' (NKJV). This is still true when we come to Romans 11! The question is, in Romans 11:26, does 'Israel' mean 'elect Israel' (that is, the remnant), or 'ethnic Israel' (that is, Jews as Jews)? The answer is self-evident. It must be the elect in Israel; it can be nothing else, for *no other Jew will ever be saved*. It is not a question of prophecy, the millennium (post- or pre-), or dispensationalism. It is a fundamental and obvious point of basic biblical teaching. Only the elect will be saved, and only the elect can be saved. If 'Israel' here does not mean 'the elect in Israel', then it means that at least some non-elect Jews will be saved, which is out of the question.

Or, of course, it must mean that every last Jew is elect, and every Jew will be saved, a claim which cannot be sustained. Judas was not saved. But what if it means that every Jew living at the time of the supposed awakening will be saved? Or every Jew at the time of Christ's return? If the apostle meant any of this, why ever did he not say so? In any case, as I have explained, Paul is not talking about a climactic explosive event at the end of the age. Rather, he is speaking of a continuous process, something which is going on throughout the course of the age.

I find it remarkable – not to say incredible – that all the following suggestions are made for 'all Israel': 'Israel as a whole, Israel as a nation', 'the people as a whole', 'the mass'; and so 'all Israel will be saved'. But writers of the triumphalist school ought to spell out precisely what they understand by 'all Israel'. They certainly do not agree among themselves. Let's think of some more possibilities. Is it 'every Israelite who ever lived', 'every Israelite who lives after the fullness of the Gentiles has come in', 'every

Israelite who is alive at the coming of Christ', 'the whole nation', 'most Jews', 'many Jews', or what? Whatever it means, it surely must include the overwhelming majority.

Indeed, if the references to the prophets (Rom. 11:26-27) are to be taken literally of Israel at the second coming, then literally all Israel must be saved. After all, the deliverer 'will turn away ungodliness from Jacob' and 'take away their sins'. Whose sins? The sins of Israel – since it is Israel who are 'the enemies' for the sake of the Gentiles, and it is Israel who 'have been disobedient' (Rom. 11:28,31). Those who were enemies and were disobedient will be saved under 'all Israel'. 'All Israel' must mean 'all Israel', Israel as a whole, entire Israel!

But all this has taken us far, far beyond the idea of 'the remnant'. If Paul is here predicting that a huge number of Jews is to be converted, why does he speak so dogmatically about a remnant being saved, *and only a remnant*? As he does (Rom. 9:27). Indeed, the point of that verse is that *only* a remnant will be saved, and unless God had left that remnant, all Israel would have been damned (Rom. 9:28). If, in Romans 11, Paul is speaking of a massive conversion of the Jews, why is 'the remnant' still his theme at the opening of Romans 11? And why is he so concerned that Jews might not be saved? As he is (Rom. 9:1-4; 10:1; 11:13-14). Moreover, why is he so hesitant and modest at key points in his argument? As he is (Rom. 11:14,23). Triumphalism or optimism as to the mass conversion of Israel is noteworthy by its absence in Paul's writings – in Romans 11 (and everywhere else).³⁷ Such an emphasis would have contradicted his unmissable emphasis upon the 'remnant'. In short, 'all Israel' can only mean 'all the elect in Israel'.

Now I grant that this means a shift in the meaning of 'Israel' from Romans 11:25 to 11:26. But this is no problem. Have we not met the apostle doing this very thing, and doing it within the context? He executed precisely the same shift within a single verse; namely, Romans 9:6. Indeed, he made this shift right at the opening of his entire discourse, setting the verse at the head of all he had to say on the subject. This shift, in fact, is fundamental to

³⁷ See below.

his thesis, and has been so right from the start. As I say, Romans 9:6 is the key verse for this entire debate: 'It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel'.

Also, it is objected, the fact that all the elect of Israel will be saved was no mystery. But I have already dealt with this. Paul does not say it was a mystery. Nor have I said so. The 'mystery' of Romans 11:25-26 is that it is *in this way* in which all Israel – all the elect in Israel – will be saved. All the interchange between Jews and Gentiles, the partial hardening, and so on – especially in light of Israel's stumbling – that God would use all that to save elect Gentiles, and, at the same time, continue to call elect Jews – *this* was the mystery, especially God's willingness still to save Jews. And this is what Paul is making clear in Romans 11. From verse 11, Paul has been setting out the wisdom of God in this plan, and this is how he concludes the chapter (Rom. 11:33-36).

There's no warrant whatsoever for bringing in the apocalyptic. Paul does not. He does not mention the return of Christ at all in connection with this – not anywhere in the entire chapter or its context. Nor is there any warrant for positing a gap between verses 25 and 26, and then filling it with momentous events such as the coming of Christ and the resurrection of the righteous. Filling it? Many teachers cram a host of Old Testament prophecies into the so-called gap! Yet, if Paul had been thinking in apocalyptic terms, how could he have failed to mention such things?³⁸ I agree, a massive amount of the Old Testament *can* be funnelled into Romans 11, but that is precisely what has to be done – *it has to be funnelled in*. In this passage, Paul didn't speak in apocalyptic terms at all. And, if the millennialists are right, why didn't the apostle quote the myriad of Old Testament passages which millennialists like to bring in at this point? Paul is perfectly capable of adducing plenty of scriptural proofs for his argument. After all, at this stage in his letter, on my reckoning he has cited or quoted the Old Testament at least 50 times. So, if the millennialists are right, why did Paul not cite, say, Isaiah 66, Jeremiah 30 – 31, Ezekiel 36 – 48, Zechariah 13 – 14 at this point? How convincing *that* would have

³⁸ And *vice versa*. How could the apostles, when writing about the return of Christ, fail to speak of the conversion of all Israel?

been! How natural! But he didn't! The quotations from Isaiah 27 and 59 and Jeremiah 31 do not refer to the second coming – they are prophecies of the first coming of Christ and the setting up of the new covenant. Zion is the church, the *ekklēsia*.³⁹ We know what the New Testament makes of Jeremiah 31 (Heb. 8:6-13; 10:12-18), and that gives us the key for the interpretation of Romans 11:26-27. Moreover, see how Paul quotes the prophets in Romans 9 and 10, but not once in the way the triumphalists wish. Why not?

This is such a vital point, let me set it out as clearly as I can. First the apostle's quotation:

The deliverer will come from⁴⁰ Zion; he will turn godlessness away from Jacob. *And this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins* (Rom. 11:26-27).

Now the original passages upon which he drew:

By this, then, will *Jacob's guilt be atoned for, and this will be the full fruitage of the removal of his sin* (Isa. 27:9).

'The Redeemer will come to Zion, *to those in Jacob who repent of their sins*', declares the LORD. 'As for me, *this is my covenant with them*', says the LORD. 'My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the

³⁹ See Rom. 9:33; Heb. 12:22 and 1 Pet. 2:6. Rom. 9:33 is the only other place where Paul uses 'Zion', and there it speaks of the first coming of Christ, and the formation of the church. Israel stumbled over Christ at his first coming, but 'all Israel' will be saved by the work of Christ in that coming.

⁴⁰ 'From' not 'to'. Paul does not quote either the Hebrew or the Septuagint of Isa. 59:20 exactly, but he follows the latter more closely than the former; in the Hebrew, it is: 'to Zion', and in the Septuagint: 'for the sake of Zion'. Matthew Henry commented: Christ 'is said to come to Zion, because when the prophet prophesied he was yet to come into the world, and [to] Zion... he came... but, when the apostle wrote this, he had come, he had been in Zion; and he is speaking of the fruits of his appearing, which shall come out of Zion; thence, as from the spring, issued forth those streams of living water which in the everlasting gospel watered the nations. "Out of Zion went forth the law" (Isa. 2:3). Compare Luke 24:47'. Just so! 'A star will come out of Jacob; a sceptre will rise out of Israel... A ruler will come out of Jacob' (Num. 24:17-19).

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mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever', says the LORD (Isa. 59:20-21).

'The time is coming', declares the LORD, 'when *I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them', declares the LORD... 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying: "Know the LORD", because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest', declares the LORD. 'For *I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more*' (Jer. 31:31-34).

I say that those quotations are all of a piece with the following:

All your sons will be taught by the LORD (Isa. 54:13).

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; *I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols*. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. *I will save you from all your uncleanness* (Ezek. 36:25-29).

This is nothing less than the new covenant. As Christ explained:

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day... No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets: 'They will all be taught by God'. Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me (John 6:37-45).

As the writer to the Hebrews told us:

The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs [the priests of the old covenant] as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had

been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: 'The time is coming', declares the Lord, '*when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying: "Know the Lord", because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more*'. By calling this covenant 'new', he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear...

When this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: 'This is the covenant I will make with them after that time', says the Lord. 'I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds'. Then he adds: '*Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more*'. And where *these have been forgiven*, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin (Heb. 8:6-13; 10:12-18).

All those extracts are concerned with the new covenant. Thus it is clear: in Romans 11:26-27, Paul cites prophecies that are to do with the new covenant. In other words, he is not referring to the return of Christ and the end of this age. No! He is speaking of the first coming of Christ and the gospel age; 'now', in fact. I will return to this 'now'. It carries great weight here.

So the psalmist's prayer: 'Oh, that salvation for Israel would come out of Zion! When the LORD restores the fortunes of his people, let Jacob rejoice and Israel be glad!' (Psa. 14:7; 53:6) is fulfilled in and through the preaching of the gospel now. *This* is what Paul is saying in Romans 11.

In short, at this point in Romans 11, it's too easy for commentators to get carried away with their hopes for a future restoration of Israel, and thereby forget Paul's stated purpose in writing the chapter. I don't grow weary of repeating this theme.

Men forget it too easily – or else ignore it – and so end up making the apostle say things which never entered his head.

Paul did not write to predict the salvation of Israel as a nation. He had a much more modest – though wonderful – purpose. He wrote to tell the Gentiles (and Jews) that the Jews had not sinned themselves beyond hope; indeed, that God uses even the fall of the Jews to bring about good; that God saves his elect from both Jews and Gentiles; in particular, that every elect Jew will be saved, despite the tragic response Israel gave to Christ – both when he came, and when he was preached. And, of course, the apostle spelled all this out to forge a powerful tool in his determination to encourage as many fellow-Jews as possible to come to Christ. It is tragic that some think in terms of Israel's restoration and renewal, the reinstatement of the nation of Israel and its attendant old-covenant practices, while they virtually ignore or side-line the gospel blessings which Paul so clearly spoke of in this chapter.

Romans 11:28-32

As far as the gospel is concerned, they [the Jews] are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you. For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.

Paul repeats his argument. He's not afraid of repetition! Moved with intense compassion for his fellow-Jews (Rom. 9:1-4; 10:1; 11:13-14), determined to pull out all the stops to get as many of them converted as possible, he is driven to reinforce the truth with all the power at his disposal. Is there any hope for the Jews? Of course there is! Indeed, the Jews had a special connection to Abraham – long before the Gentiles came into it. And God's purpose still stands. He will, even now, have mercy upon whom he will have mercy (Rom. 9:15), both Jew and Gentile. Indeed, he is continually working out his determination to show mercy, working it out now – *now* – through the interplay between the obedience and disobedience of all concerned. This is the apostle's point. There is no warrant for interjecting the idea that God will save the

nation of Israel at the last day when Christ appears. Paul had no thought of that. Nor did he say anything like it.

As for the ‘election’ Paul speaks of in these verses, my earlier comments apply. It could be personal election to salvation, or national election in God’s purpose under the old covenant. If it is election to salvation, the ‘they’ can only be the remnant, the spiritual Israel, the elect among them. If, on the other hand, Paul is referring to Israel’s role in the old covenant, this has no relevance now – or to any supposed apocalyptic future for Israel. Israel’s role, as I have explained, was to receive the law and to bear Christ under the law (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4; Gal. 4:4-5; see also Luke 2:27,39). That role has now ceased, Christ having come, and having brought the old covenant to its end by fulfilling it and establishing the new.

Triumphalists tie themselves in knots at this point. Some are prepared to speak of ‘two elections’, leading to the salvation of ‘the remnant’ in this age and ‘all Israel’ in the last days. This can only mean that there are two elections to salvation among the Jews – the personal election of the remnant and the election of the nation – both, as I say, to salvation. The only word for it is ‘nonsense’! There are not two elections to salvation! Election is one eternal decree of God – fixed in eternity past, unchangeable and unchanging through time, and continues in force until eternity future. In any case, ‘this present age’ and ‘the last days’ are one and the same. Paul has already clearly distinguished between Israel as a nation and the elect within that nation. Romans 9 – 11 is based upon it: ‘Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were blinded’ (Rom. 11:7, NKJV). ‘Israel has not obtained it’, and the (permanent) blinding of ‘the rest’, surely destroys all talk of ‘Israel’s conversion’.

What is more, there is a highly significant manuscript variation in Romans 11:31. The most likely reading is: ‘They have disobeyed for the sake of mercy for you in order they also might *now* receive mercy’. This ‘now’ is included in the NASB, ESV and the preferred NIV rendering. If it is indeed the right reading, and I am convinced it is, it means that Paul could not possibly have been thinking in terms of the end of the age. Rather it confirms what we have seen throughout the chapter. Alas, not all who write or speak

on Romans 11 pay sufficient attention to this ‘now’. Indeed, some do not even mention it! This is a mistake of massive proportions. Paul uses ‘now’ three times in very short compass: ‘Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have *now* received mercy as a result of their disobedience, so they too have *now* become disobedient in order that they too may *now* receive mercy as a result of God’s mercy to you’ (Rom. 11:30-31). Reader, if you read it aloud – and the original recipients of the letter in Rome would have heard it read aloud – you will certainly get the punchy apostolic ‘now’.

Clearly, by his triple use of ‘now’, the apostle is not speaking of the end of the age. The interplay between Jew and Gentile, and its culmination, is something happening during this age, throughout this age, ‘the present time’ (Rom. 11:5) – it was going on ‘now’ in Paul’s own time – and it is going on ‘now’. The apostle is speaking of a process, not a climactic event, a process that has been playing out for nearly 2000 years. In other words, the ‘now’ destroys the argument which places, at the end of the age, and beyond, the blessing for the Jews as set out by Paul in Romans 11. ‘Now’, in Romans 11:31, means ‘now’! And this is precisely what the apostle has been arguing all along. God is saving all his elect – including Jews – now!

Some triumphalists, sensing the corner into which they are boxing themselves, as that corner gets ever closer and tighter, show a marked degree of hesitation. But Paul shows no hesitation whatsoever at this point in his argument. Concerning God’s mercy to Israel, there is no ‘could’ or ‘might be’ about it: the Jews were rejecting Christ in Paul’s day; the Gentiles were coming in during Paul’s day; the Jews were receiving mercy even as Paul was writing. It is ironic that triumphalist teachers seem dogmatic where Paul simply supposes (Rom. 11:12-15), yet are hesitant where the apostle is clearly dogmatic (Rom. 11:26-32).

It was all ‘now’. It is all ‘now’. Romans 11 is happening ‘now’ – in our day. God is saving ‘all Israel’ – that is, all elect Jews – now. ‘Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation’ (2 Cor. 6:2, NKJV), for Jew and Gentile. Romans 11:31 has enormous bearing on the overall view of the chapter. Whatever Paul was talking about was happening ‘now’ – even as he wrote –

it has been happening ever since, it is happening now, and it will go on happening until Christ returns.

Romans 11:32 also has a contribution to make on this point: 'For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all'. Do not miss the 'for', a key word. These verses are all of a piece, one continuous argument. They are not isolated texts. The fact is, Paul didn't write in verses. The 'for' leads to the punch line: 'God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all', 'all men': that is, *all* sinners, not Jews, not Gentiles, but *all* sinners.

Now a superficial reading of the verse leads to the view that all will be saved – either all Jews, or all sinners, both of which, of course, are out of the question. To my mind the 'all' refers to 'sinners in general, whether or not they are Jews'. God will save all whom he is going to save; that is, 'his elect'. And this is the way he is going to save them – by his plan whereby he works salvation among Jews and Gentiles through this interplay between the two groups. My point is that Romans 11:32 helps us in our understanding of 'the reconciliation of the world' (Rom. 11:15) and 'all Israel' (Rom. 11:26). God is going to save all his elect among the Gentiles, and, above all, as far as Paul in Romans 11 is concerned, God is going to save all his elect in Israel, the 'all Israel' of Romans 11:26. In this way, God will have mercy on all his elect.

The climax for Paul is God's mercy upon *all*; not, mercy upon *Israel*. This is true for Romans as a whole, let alone chapters 9 – 11. Consider Romans 15:8-12. Christ became a servant of the Jews, was born under the law, for the sake of the truth of God, for two reasons. *First*, to confirm the promises made to the fathers; that is, for the blessing of Israel, as promised to the patriarchs. *Secondly*, so that the Gentiles, too, in their turn, might glorify God for his mercy. As God had promised to Abraham, announcing the gospel to him in advance (Gal. 3:8; see also Luke 1:68-79; Rom. 1:2; 3:21; 16:26), he intended, through Christ, to bless all nations, Jews and Gentiles. Let me quote the apostle:

I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, as it is written: 'Therefore I

will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing hymns to your name'. Again, it says: 'Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people'. And again: 'Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and sing praises to him, all you peoples'. And again, Isaiah says: 'The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him' (Rom. 15:8-12).

And this is precisely the point I made earlier concerning the old covenant. Israel played a pivotal role in salvation history. In the old covenant, Israel received the law, and received Christ under the law. And when Christ fulfilled the law, he spelled the end of that covenant, the end of the law and Israel. The purpose of Israel, the purpose of the law and the purpose of the old covenant in salvation history (I deliberately put it in the singular – 'the purpose') was by Christ fulfilled, and therefore the old covenant was abolished. Christ came to do his Father's will, to complete, fulfil and accomplish it (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 19:30; Heb. 10:5-10). And thus the gospel has broken out into all the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:45-49; John 3:14-17; Acts 1:8; Rom. 10:18; Col. 1:6), and all the elect (both Jew and Gentile) are being saved. This is God's purpose:

We maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law. Is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised [the Jew] by faith and the uncircumcised [the Gentile] through that same faith (Rom. 3:28-30).

God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy... to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory – even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles (Rom. 9:18,23-24).⁴¹

Paul never tires of the theme – that Gentiles are included with Jews in the body of the elect, and that this has always been part of God's eternal purpose to his eternal glory:

Christ... himself is our peace, who has made the two [Jew and Gentile] one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and

⁴¹ It is not just Paul, of course. Peter was the first to come to it, closely followed by the other apostles and all brothers in Judea (Acts 10:1 – 11:18).

regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. 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. I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (Eph. 2:13 – 3:11).

God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me (Col. 1:27-29).

One would think, if the triumphalist teachers are right, that Paul would have finished writing Romans 11 on the high note of the salvation of a massive number of Jews; in their terms, 'all Israel', the nation of Israel. He did not! His climax was the salvation of all the elect, whether Jew or Gentile. Indeed, Paul actually concluded

with the Gentiles; in fact, with the salvation of the elect in all nations (Rom. 11:28-32).⁴²

Returning to Romans 15:8-12 for a moment, when the apostle quoted Isaiah 11:10, the calling of the Gentiles, he broke off at that very point – the calling of the Gentiles. And, even if he had gone on to quote the next verse (Isa. 11:11), he would have been speaking, like the prophet, of the calling of *the remnant* of Israel. Once again we have the saving of the remnant – not the saving of ‘all Israel’ without exception (or something very like it) after the saving of the elect remnant out of Israel.

Romans 9 and 11 speak with one voice. The remnant among the Jews will be saved. God’s determination to save all his elect (Jew and Gentile) is invincible. And Paul wants as many sinners (especially, in this context, Jewish sinners) as possible to be converted.

And teaching of a time of a massive conversion of Jews is absent not only in Romans 11. Where else in the post-Pentecost sacred writings do we find teaching about a glorious future for Israel with consequent blessing for the entire world? Nowhere!⁴³ *But if we are to expect a glorious saving purpose for the nation of Israel, the lack of such teaching anywhere else (assuming, for the sake of argument, that it is in Romans 11) in the post-Pentecost sacred writings must be – or ought to be – utterly disconcerting for the triumphalist interpreters.* It is! They tell us so! The truth is, the lack of such scriptures destroys their view.

Surely such a massive hope could not be so conspicuous by its absence in the post-Pentecost sacred writings – leaving the triumphalist interpretation of Romans 11 to stand isolated in a sea

⁴² As he did the entire letter: ‘So that all nations might believe and obey [God] – to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen’ (Rom. 16:26-27).

⁴³ What about: ‘Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you – even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets’ (Acts 3:19-21)? I fail to see that Peter predicts a massive number of conversions among the Jews. Rather, I see a reference to Rom. 8:21.

of Scripture. *All this* speaks volumes against all notion of Israel as a special people in the age of the new covenant. Imagine if we faced the same lack of post-Pentecost evidence for the resurrection! And, as I have shown, the triumphalist view can only be deduced from Romans 11 by straining Paul's words far beyond his intended *and stated* purpose, and by resting, at strategic points, on glosses which allow its teachers to come to and promulgate their predetermined conclusion.

In short, the triumphalists have to admit that they can find no other passage in all the apostolic writings to support their view. While, perhaps, this is not sufficient in and of itself to reject their overall view of Romans 11, it ought to make them seriously – very seriously – to pause.

But I would go much further. I will go much further.⁴⁴ It is not only the lack of corroborating evidence in Scripture that is so devastating for the triumphalists' view. Paul's dogmatic assertion in 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 has to be taken fully into account:

You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

I am at a loss how such a passage can sit easily with the idea that there will be a huge number of Jews converted – *en masse*, I might say. And that's putting it mildly! 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16 rules out, at a stroke, the triumphalist view of Romans 11. Paul offers no hint of an ultimate recovery along the lines of a massive awakening among the Jews – let alone unmitigated blessing, even the conversion of the nation of Israel.

Putting all this together – the lack of corroborating evidence and the clear statement that the Jews are under the wrath of God (with no suggestion of any mitigating circumstance) – surely puts the final nail into the coffin of the triumphalist interpretation of Romans 11.

⁴⁴ See below.

We can broaden the point: Scripture clearly declares that this age will degenerate, that apostasy and error will abound, Antichrist will wreak havoc, and the love of many will grow cold (Matt. 24:4-29; Luke 21:8-28; Acts 20:29-30; Rom. 16:17-19; 2 Thess. 2:3-12; 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-9; 4:3-4; 2 Pet. 3:3-4; 1 John 2:18-19,22; 4:1-3; 2 John 7-11; Jude 18). When Christ comes, will he find faith on earth (Luke 18:8)? How can such clear testimonies fit in with the golden age of the post-millennialists? They, it seems, are prepared to accept there might well be a massive declension at the end of the age, but, they say, this comes after the golden period, and does not contradict it. This seems most odd! A degeneration, an apostasy, after ‘all Israel’ has been saved, after Gentiles and Jews have experienced fullness – and then some more! – it will all end in ruin? Is this the glorious, triumphant – not to say, triumphalist – picture the apostle wants us to take away from Romans 11? Really?

As Jesus said: ‘Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved’ (Matt. 24:12-13), and the end will be like the days of Noah (Luke 17:26-37), with faith at a premium (Luke 18:8) – not some golden age of world-wide revival, with men falling over each other to be converted! And then some more!

As for those who are expecting a 1000 years’ kingdom for Israel, even they admit that this golden age will end in disaster, catastrophic ruin.

Let’s get back to reality – to what Paul actually said. The wonder of Romans 11 is that God will save all his elect, not excluding the elect in Israel. In particular, in his great mercy, even though the Jews rejected his Son despite the detailed preparations he had made for his coming among them, and gave Israel repeated predictions of it, God has not allowed their sin to make him go back on his electing purpose and grace. Jews can still be saved; Jews are being saved; Jews will be saved. All Israel – all the elect among them – will be saved. And God in his wisdom has turned even the Jews’ sin to good account. What massive blessings have come to the world, to Gentiles as well as Jews, in the new covenant – far vaster than any could imagine under the old covenant. ‘Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God.

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How unsearchable are his judgements and his ways past finding out!... For of him and through him and to him are all things, to whom be glory for ever. Amen' (Rom. 11:33-36).

Review of the key points of this chapter

1. Paul wrote Romans 11 to demonstrate that God's will in election (and hardening) has not failed, and can never fail.
2. Paul wrote Romans 11 to arouse as many of his fellow-Jews as possible to be converted, and he was prepared to use every means at his disposal to bring this about.
3. It is in light of these two purposes that Romans 11 must be viewed. Reference to the second coming is foreign to the chapter. Moreover, Paul's use of supposition must not be turned into prediction. Rather, it must be read in line with previous points.