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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.

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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?

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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

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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.

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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

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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

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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).

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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

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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.

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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.

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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.