

XXV. Grafting in the Gentiles

November 29/30 & December 1, 2016 Romans 11:11-24

Aim: To recognize that the New Testament Church is a continuation of the Old Testament Israel as the one people of God, comprised of both Jews and Gentiles.

[DSB Note: Almost all major conservative commentaries view Romans 11 (especially 11:25-26) as referring to a time of future conversion of national Israel/Jews to Christianity – ‘and in this way *all Israel* will be saved’ (11:26a). Moo is a clear representative of this view, which is also held by Hughes, Sproul, and MacArthur (with a pre-millennial twist). Paul Barnett sees 11:25-26 as referring to the elect or the remnant within national Israel. However, O. Palmer Robertson (following Calvin), in his book *The Israel of God*, makes the convincing case that Paul really has the completion of the church – composed of both Jews and Gentiles, making up ‘the Israel of God’ – as his primary theme. The following notes will contain both views; the majority view as per normal, while Robertson’s view is highlighted in red at each point.]

As Paul has summarized the matter in 11:7-10, the gospel has divided Israel into two parts: a ‘remnant,’ who through the electing grace of God has attained the righteousness revealed in the gospel, and ‘the rest,’ hardened by God in their sin and excluded from this righteousness. Paul now asks whether this situation is permanent. His answer? It is not. For the ‘rejection’ of Israel as a whole is not God’s last word to Israel. This rejection, Paul argues, is but the first step in an unfolding process. The second step is of special relevance to the Gentiles: Israel’s repudiation of the blessings naturally belonging to her has caused them to be diverted into another, wider, channel, in which they are now flowing to the whole world. But this is not the end of the story. For this flood of blessings will one day be turned again toward Israel. At the climax of this age, her hardening will be removed, and the present tiny remnant of Jewish believers will be expanded to include a much greater number of Jews obedient to the gospel. Israel’s rejection is neither total (11:1-10) nor final (11:11-32).

Romans 11:11-32 falls into three clearly distinguished paragraphs: vv. 11-15, vv. 16-24, and vv. 25-32. In each of these paragraphs Paul directly addresses Gentile believers: cp. v. 13, ‘I am speaking to you Gentiles,’ and the continuation of this address with the second person singular in vv. 17-24 and the second person plural in vv. 25-32. This address reveals the specific hortatory purpose of Paul’s sketch of salvation history: to stifle the tendency among Gentile Christians to ‘boast over’ Jews and Jewish Christians (cp. vv. 18 and 25; note also 14:3). Paul’s turn from argument to exhortation may help explain the sudden falloff in OT quotations (the only quotation comes in vv. 26b-27). It must be emphasized, however, that hardly a verse goes by without an allusion to the OT.

Paul knew that Gentile Christians in Rome were engaging in such inappropriate bragging; and the need to curb this sinful pride was one of his main motivations in writing chapters 9-11 and, indeed, the letter as whole. But, in keeping with the nature of Romans, Paul also knew that the problem he was tackling here was endemic in the early Christian church. For the problem was an understandable outgrowth of the shift of salvation history that had taken place. The Gentiles’ rejoicing at being *included* with Jews in God’s people would all too easily lead to boasting that they had *replaced* the Jews as the people of God. Sorry to say, such an assumption is still rampant in the Christian church. Paul therefore warns us, as he warned the first-century Gentile Christians in Rome: don’t assume the Gentile preponderance in the church means that God has

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abandoned His people Israel. God has brought salvation to the Gentiles without violating any of His promises to Israel and without retracting His election of Israel as a corporate whole: an election that, like all God's gifts, is 'irrevocable' (v. 29).

Robertson: A major concern of the second paragraph of Romans 11 (vv. 11-15) is the current results of Paul's ministry (see especially vv. 13-15). The third major paragraph of Romans 11 (vv. 17-24) also presents the expectation of Israel's positive response to the present preaching of the gospel. Paul's kinsmen will be 'grafted in' just like the Gentiles. 'If they do not continue in unbelief' they will participate in the promises. This participation by being 'grafted in' cannot be postponed to some future time, while Gentile believers immediately experience the blessing of the covenant. Just like every present Gentile believer, every present Jewish believer will be grafted in. Like the previous sections of Romans 11, this paragraph emphasizes the present significance of the Jews in fulfilling God's purposes of salvation.

A. Rejection of the Jews (Romans 11:11-15)

The opening question shows that Paul wants to deny an inference that his readers might draw from what he has just said. The antecedent to the third person possessive pronoun in v. 12 – 'their' – must be Israel as a whole and not the hardened 'remainder' only. And the continuity between vv. 11 and 12 demands that the implied subject of the third person plural verbs in v. 11 be the same: Israel as a whole. Paul's question, in v. 11, therefore, is not related to vv. 7b-10 but to v. 7a, which restates a key point that Paul has made earlier: Israel (as a whole) has not attained the righteousness that it was seeking (see esp. 9:31-32; also 10:3, 21). The issue in vv. 11ff. is therefore not 'Can the hardened within Israel still be saved?' but 'Can Israel as a whole still be saved?' As the contrast with the Gentiles throughout vv. 11-32 suggests, Paul is thinking mainly in terms of corporate bodies, not in terms of individuals within those bodies.

The structure of this paragraph follows a familiar model: rhetorical question, emphatic denial (v. 11a), and explanation (vv. 11b-15). The explanation uses the pattern of oscillation between Israel and the Gentiles that is basic to this whole section.

1. Rhetorical Question (11:11a)

¹¹So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means!

The opening of this paragraph parallels the opening of vv. 1-10 exactly: 'I say therefore,' a rhetorical question expecting a negative answer, followed by an emphatic rejection: 'By no means!' Paul's question picks up his summary assertion about Israel as a whole in v. 7a: 'They [Israelites generally] have not stumbled so as to fall, have they?' Israel's 'stumbling' refers to her rejection of Christ and the righteousness of God offered through Him (9:31-33; 10:3), while 'fall' (*πιπτω, piptō*) denotes irretrievable spiritual ruin.

God's temporarily setting Israel aside was not an afterthought or an outburst of emotional anger but had a definite purpose. God had not allowed His chosen people Israel to fall into such unbelief and disobedience that they are unsalvageable. He has indeed given them a 'spirit of stupor' and He 'let their eyes be darkened to see not' (vv. 8, 10). For a divinely appointed time, He has let them wander about in spiritual blindness and darkness. Yet their blindness is not irreversible, and their darkness was never to be permanent.

Paul has already told us that Israel had missed their calling. Holding to works righteousness, they had become blind to the truth of redemption. They had tripped over the Messiah. He was a

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rock of offense and a stumbling block to His own people. Now Paul explores the purpose of their stumbling; in other words, what was God's design in it? The result of stumbling is usually falling. When we trip, we fall, and when we fall, we often get hurt. Sometimes we fall and cannot get up. Did God want his people to fall, not just temporarily but fully and finally? Paul gives the same emphatic response that he has so often in this epistle: 'Certainly not!' We should not conclude that God's purpose in the stumbling of Israel was their permanent fall into destruction.

2. Response (11:11b-15)

a) Reason for Israel's Stumbling (11:11b)

Rather through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.

In contrast ('but') to the inference that Israel's rejection of Christ has forever excluded her from any special place in God's purposes is the actual situation: Israel's sin is the starting point of a process that will lead back to blessing for Israel. The middle stage of this process involves the Gentiles. It is 'because of' Israel's 'trespass' (*παραπτώμα, paraptōma*) that salvation has come to the Gentiles. Paul probably has in mind the way in which he and other preachers of the gospel would turn to the Gentiles after being spurned by the Jews.

Through the stumbling of Israel, God's gracious, far-reaching 'salvation' was extended to the Gentiles. Israel's temporary loss was the Gentiles' permanent gain. Although the widespread salvation of Gentiles came about because Israel as a nation refused her Savior, that extension of grace was not an afterthought with God. From His first call of Abraham, it was God's intent that His chosen people should be the instruments of bringing salvation to the Gentiles (Gen. 12:3; Is. 49:6).

God's objective in setting Israel aside was 'to make her jealous' of Gentiles. 'To make' translates a Greek infinitive with a preposition and carries the idea of purpose. And although jealousy is essentially a negative term, God's intention was for Israel's jealousy of Gentiles to be a positive stimulus to draw His people back to Himself. But Jews had long disdained Gentiles, whom they considered to be outside the boundaries of God's grace. To be told they had lost their special relationship to God was distressing enough, but to be told that God offered that forfeited relationship to Gentiles was a bitter pill indeed.

But the salvation of Gentiles leads in turn back to Israel. Borrowing the concept from Deuteronomy 32:21, which he quoted in 10:19, Paul indicates that one of the purposes of the salvation of the Gentiles is to stimulate Israel to jealousy. Paul apparently thinks that the Jews, as they see the Gentiles enjoying the messianic blessings promised first of all to them, will want those blessings for themselves.

The influx of Gentiles into the kingdom of God and the Abrahamic covenant will stir the Jews to jealousy (cp. Dt. 32:21b). When Jews see Gentiles streaming in, they will be stirred to enter themselves. Possibly this had been Paul's own experience as he ministered to Gentiles in Syria-Cilicia, encouraging him to engage more fully in his westward mission work among Gentiles.

But God's ultimate purpose in setting Israel aside was not to drive His people further away but to bring them back to Himself. He wanted to make them face their own sin and its consequences, to sense their alienation from Jehovah, and to recognize their need for the salvation that He now offered the Gentiles. As Jews see the Lord pour out the kind of blessings on the Gentile church

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that once were reserved for Israel, some of them desire that blessing for themselves and come to Jesus Christ, their spurned Messiah, in repentance and faith. That happens with individual Jews throughout this age, and will one day happen to the whole nation.

(1) Salvation to the Gentiles (11:12)

¹²*Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!*

Paul now elaborates on the process he introduced in v. 11b, using the familiar ‘how much more’ logic (see 5:9, 10, 15, 17) to contrast the benefits of Israel’s rejection of Christ with the blessing that will come with Israel’s ‘fullness.’ His purpose is thus to accentuate the importance of this final stage in the process. And, as his way of referring to Israel reveals – *their* trespass, *their* diminution, *their* fullness – he seems already to have in mind Gentile readers. Paul wants Gentile Christians to recognize the significance for themselves of Israel’s restoration to divine favor.

Paul speaks again of Israel’s ‘trespass,’ but characterizes it a second time with the term *hēttēma*. This term seems to have a basically quantitative nuance, denoting a ‘defeat’ or ‘loss,’ and this sense fits the context well: Israel’s trespass in rejecting Christ has been for her a signal spiritual defeat. But Israel’s loss has been the Gentile’s gain; her trespass has meant ‘riches’ (*πλουτος*, *ploutos*) for the world’; her defeat ‘riches for the Gentiles.’ The parallelism demonstrates that ‘world’ (*κοσμος*, *kosmos*) means, as in typical Jewish fashion, the Gentile world. Yet the logic of Paul’s sentence implies that the blessing that will come to the Gentiles at the time of Israel’s ‘fullness’ will be much greater. What is implicit here is made explicit in v. 15, where Paul identifies this blessing as ‘life from the dead.’

But what specifically does Paul mean when he speaks of ‘their [the Jews’] fullness’? The Greek word is *plērōma*, and it denotes ‘full measure,’ ‘completeness.’ With a qualitative connotation, *plērōma*, as the opposite of Israel’s ‘trespass’ and ‘defeat,’ would refer to her ‘completion,’ the full restoration to Israel of the blessings of the kingdom that she is now, as a corporate entity, missing. If, on the other hand, we give a quantitative sense to *plērōma*, Paul’s reference would be to the ‘full number’ of Jews. The implication in this case would be that to the present remnant there will be added a much greater number of Jewish believers so as to ‘fill up’ the number of Jews destined for salvation. The parallel occurrence of the word in v. 25 – ‘when the *plērōma* of the Gentiles comes in’ – strongly favors a numerical sense: ‘the full number of Jews.’ Perhaps, however, we need not choose between the qualitative and quantitative options. While *plērōma* probably has a qualitative denotation – ‘fullness’ – the context and parallel with v. 25 suggests that this ‘fullness’ is attained through a numerical process. Paul would then be suggesting that the present ‘defeat’ of Israel in which Israel is numerically reduced to a small remnant, will be reverse by the addition of far greater numbers of true believers: this will be Israel’s destined ‘fullness.’

(2) Jealousy of the Jews (11:13-14)

(a) Paul’s Ministry to the Gentiles (11:13)

¹³*Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry...*

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Paul's introduction, 'Now I am speaking to you Gentiles,' reveals his concern to apply what he is saying in this passage to the Gentile Christian majority in the church at Rome. In vv. 13-14 he is specifically concerned to correct any misapprehension among the Gentile Christians about the implications for Israel in his concentration on Gentiles in his ministry. For we can understand how Gentile Christians might appeal to Paul himself, 'the apostle to the Gentiles,' as further reason to disdain Jews and Jewish Christians. 'You see,' they might argue, 'Paul himself, though a Jew, has given up on his own people and is devoting all his efforts to us, the Gentiles.' True, Paul responds, in accordance with God's particular call on my life, I have spent most of my time ministering to Gentiles. But contrary to what you might expect, to the degree that I am apostle to the Gentiles, I 'glorify my ministry' – I take pride in it and work very hard at it – with the hope that it will indirectly serve to bring Jewish people into the kingdom of God (cp. v. 14).

Even though Paul was a Jew, he was called by Christ as a missionary and apostle to the Gentiles. Paul magnifies his ministry, not to magnify himself, but to remind his Roman readers that Christ had chosen him for the work of which they were a part.

In other words, Paul does not want to underplay his special calling to reach the Gentile world for Christ. He emphasized that calling wherever he ministered (see Acts 18:6; 22:21; 26:17-18; Eph. 3:8; 1 Tim. 3:7). But he also knew that 'salvation is from the Jews' (Jn. 4:22). His special calling and love for the unsaved Gentile world in no way diminished his affection for unsaved fellow Jews and for unbelieving Israel as a people.

(b) Paul's Ministry to the Jews (11:14)

...¹⁴ *in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.*

In addition to wanting to bring Gentiles to salvation for their own sakes, he also wanted their salvation to be God's instrument for redeeming Jews.

Paul articulates passion for the brothers and sisters of his own nation. He uses the term *jealousy*. The Jews were hostile, bitter in their opposition to the Christian church, but Paul hopes that as the glory of the church is continually made manifest, his kinsmen will see the greatness of the gospel. If that happens, his kinsmen will be jealous rather than angry and will try to pursue what believers enjoy.

Paul's hope that his preaching to Gentiles will have a positive impact on Jews is based on the 'jealousy' theme that he introduced in v. 11b. As God uses Paul's preaching to bring more and more Gentiles to salvation, Paul hopes that Jews, his own 'flesh and blood,' will become jealous and seek for themselves the blessings of this salvation. In these verses Paul reveals his sense of being a significant figure in salvation history. As 'apostle to the Gentiles,' he has a critical – and controversial – role to play in the unfolding plan of God for the nations and for Israel. But Paul's modesty in the last part of v. 14 shows that we must not overestimate the importance that he assigned to his own ministry.

Individual believers and the corporate Body of Christ are meant to lead lives that radiate such reality that unbelieving Jews will be provoked to spiritual jealousy. Are the Jews we meet provoked to jealousy or just provoked? We Christians ought to be so alive, so full of Christ, and so full of love for one another that Jews and Gentiles say to themselves, 'They have something I don't have, and I must have it.'

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Robertson: The ‘arousing to jealousy’ and the ‘saving’ of some in Israel must be understood in the context of God’s present dealings with the nation. Paul is describing the desired consequences of his ministry to the Gentiles. As a result of his current ministry, he hopes to see Jews moved to jealousy when they see Gentile believers sharing in the blessing of the messianic kingdom.

b) Hope for Israel’s Acceptance (11:15)

Verse 15 restates the process that Paul has introduced in vv. 11b-12, albeit with different terminology. The different terminology brings two emphases in comparison with vv. 11b-12. First, whereas the earlier text implied, by means of the ‘jealousy’ motif, the importance of human response, v. 15 stresses God’s initiative in the process. Second, the final and climactic stage of the process, only hinted at in v. 12, is now spelled out: ‘life from the dead.’

(1) Reconciliation of the World (11:15a)

¹⁵*For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world...*

Paul’s focus on God’s superintendence of the process is indicated first in the phrase ‘their rejection.’ The word translated ‘rejection’ (*αποβολή, apobolē*) means ‘a throwing away’ or ‘loss.’ Paul uses the word ‘acceptance’ in the second half of the verse as a direct contrast to ‘rejection.’ This strongly suggests that ‘acceptance’ refers to ‘God’s acceptance of the Jews’; ‘rejection,’ by contrast, would refer to ‘God’s rejection of the Jews.’

Echoing vv. 11b-12, Paul indicates that God’s rejection of the Jews has meant ‘the reconciliation of the world.’ ‘Reconciliation,’ as in 5:11 (and note the corresponding verb in 5:10) refers to God’s act of bringing sinners into a peaceful relationship with Himself. Paul is again speaking in corporate categories; the ‘reconciliation of the world’ does not mean that every human being has been saved. As in verse 12, ‘world’ refers to the Gentiles, and Paul’s point is that Israel’s rejection has made it possible for Gentiles, as a group, to experience Christ’s reconciling work.

Robertson: The reference to the present saving of some in Israel by the provoking of them to jealousy (vv. 13-14) is immediately connected with the ‘receiving’ of the Jews in the following verses (vv. 15-16). The ‘for if’ (*ei gar*) of verse 15 connects the ‘receiving’ of the Jews with the present ministry of the apostle Paul in the gospel era. By his present ministry among the Gentiles the apostle hopes to move the Jews to jealousy and thereby save some of them. Their ‘saving’ as described in verse 14 corresponds to their ‘receiving’ in verse 15. In each case, Paul describes what he hopes will be the consequence of his current ministry.

(2) Life from the Death (11:15b)

...what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?

If, then, Paul argues, God’s ‘casting away’ of Israel has led to this extension to Gentiles of God’s salvation what will be the result of God’s taking Israel to Himself again? Nothing less than ‘life from the dead.’ Debate over the meaning of this phrase has been intense: nothing in chapter 11 except ‘All Israel will be saved’ in v. 26 has sparked more disagreement. The logic of the verse shows that it must refer to a blessing even greater or more climactic than the extension of reconciliation to the Gentiles. For Paul argues from the lesser to the greater: if something negative like Israel’s rejection means that Gentiles are being reconciled to God, how much greater must be the result of something positive like Israel’s acceptance? Opinions about what this greater blessing might be fall into two categories. 1) We can interpret ‘life from the dead’

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literally, understanding the phrase to refer to the general resurrection that will take place after the return of Christ in glory, or to the blessed life that will follow that resurrection. 2) We can interpret ‘life from the dead’ metaphorically, as a way of referring to a great and unprecedented blessing, whether this be a spiritual quickening of the whole world or the spiritual ‘coming back to life’ of Israel. Overall, considerations favor the former, making a reference to resurrection at the end of history seem most likely. Therefore, as Israel’s ‘trespass’ (vv. 11, 12) and ‘rejection’ (v. 15) trigger the stage of salvation history in which Paul (and we) are located, a stage in which God is specially blessing the Gentiles, so ‘fullness’ (v. 12) and ‘acceptance’ (v. 15) will trigger the climactic end of salvation history. Paul insists on the vital, continuing significance of Israel in salvation history, against tendencies among Gentile Christians to discard Israel from any further role in the plan of God. However, Paul is silent about the timing of these events.

How much more will ‘their acceptance’ (their acceptance of Christ and God’s acceptance of them) mean? Nothing short of ‘life from the dead,’ that is, ‘the resurrection of the dead.’ In other words, Israel’s acceptance of Christ will mean the climax of the ages, the onset of the kingdom of God following the universal resurrection.

If being rejected is God’s plan for the reconciliation of the world, how much more would their acceptance bring blessedness to humanity? What would it be but life from the dead? Some commentators believe that Paul is given us an eschatological hint, saying with *The Late Great Planet Earth* that the final sign of Christ’s coming and the consummation of His kingdom will be the conversion of Israel. I (RC Sproul) certainly believe that the conversion of Israel is in view later in the chapter, but I do not think that is in this part of the text. ‘What will their acceptance be but life from the dead?’ – This image has its roots in the Old Testament where we find Ezekiel’s vision of the valley of dry bones (Ez. 37:1ff.). When God’s word came over the valley of dry bones, suddenly there was a stirring and the bones began to rattle. They began to move together and were knit to one another, and then flesh came upon the bones, and then life began to course through the veins of those skeletons. From death in the valley came life, and that is the image Paul has in view here when he declares that if rejection brings salvation, the acceptance will bring so much more.

In speaking of ‘life from the dead,’ Paul was not referring to bodily resurrection. Regarding individual Jews, he was speaking of receiving spiritual life as a gracious gift to displace spiritual death, the wage of unbelief.

A worldwide quickening and spread of spiritual life will come when Israel is restored. Israel will become a tonic to the nations. The difference will be so dramatic that it can only be described as the difference between life and death.

3. Robertson on vv. 11-15

Robertson: Clearly, the apostle is describing a temporal sequence in verses 12 and 15. The Jewish people reject their Messiah; then the Gentiles believe; then the Jews are provoked by jealousy and return in faith; then the world receives even richer blessing as a consequence of this return of the Jews. One interpretation of these contrasting experiences of Israel assumes that their ‘rejection’ coincides with the present gospel age, while their ‘acceptance’ will occur subsequently, either at the very end of the present era or after the present era of the gospel proclamation has ended.

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Robertson: However, this temporal sequence may be viewed from another perspective. The whole cycle could be considered as having fulfillment in the present era of gospel proclamation. In context, Paul compares the experience of Israel to the experience of the Gentiles. According to verse 30, the Gentiles once were disobedient, but now have received mercy. In the same manner, Israel is no found disobedient, that they may also now receive mercy. For both Gentiles and Jews, the full cycle of movement from a state of disobedience to a state of mercy occurs in the present age.

Robertson: From this perspective, the ‘acceptance’ of Israel would refer to the ingrafting of believing Jews throughout the present era, which would reach its consummation when their ‘fullness’ would be realized. The parallel experience of the Gentile world offers no support to the idea that Israel’s period of rejection coincides with the present gospel age, while their acceptance is reserved for a subsequent era.

Robertson: Crucial to the understanding of these verses is Paul’s statement that by his current apostolic ministry to the Gentiles, he hopes to ‘save some’ of the Jews (v. 14). This saving of ‘some’ ought not to be regarded as the deliverance of a pitifully few Jews, hardly worthy to be compared with the ‘fullness’ to be saved at the end of time.

Robertson: Quite the contrary, this saving of ‘some’ is integrally related to one of the major themes of Romans 11. As Paul says, there remains at the present time a ‘remnant’ according to the election of grace (v. 5). It is not that the ‘some’ whom the apostle personally hopes to save are the ‘remnant’ that he discusses throughout the passage. But the saving of some and the maintaining of a remnant are interrelated ideas. Paul’s hope that some would be saved through his ministry is based on the principle that a ‘remnant’ would remain through the ages.

Robertson: A remnant is too readily assumed to be small and insignificant. But the use of the word *remnant* does not by itself determine the proportion of the whole to be saved. It speaks instead of the sovereign intervention of God to effect the salvation of men despite their expectations, humanly speaking, that all might perish. While a remnant may be small, most basically, it is simply that which is ‘left,’ whether great or small. It is therefore quite appropriate to interpret the ‘fullness’ and ‘acceptance’ of Israel from the perspective of God’s current saving activity. The apostle’s argument builds on a principle that has been true throughout redemptive history. Although outwardly it may appear as though God has cast off the Jews, He nonetheless is working sovereignly to save some of them. The ‘full number’ in Israel will be realized by the same process in which Jews are currently being received and added to the number. For the ‘remnant according to the election of grace’ encompasses the same individuals as the ‘fullness’ (i.e., full number) of Israel. The eye of man cannot tell how large this number is. But the eye of faith is confident that the full number is being realized. For this reason, it is neither necessary nor appropriate to posit some future date at which the remnant will be superseded by the full number. The completed ‘remnant’ of Israel is precisely the ‘fullness’ of Israel.

B. Inclusion of the Gentiles (Romans 11:16-24)

Verse 16 paves the way to vv. 17-24 by introducing the metaphor of the root and branches that dominate these verses. As Paul develops this metaphor, he compares the root of the tree to the patriarchs and the promise of God to them, the ‘natural branches’ to Jews, and ‘wild olive tree shoots’ to the Gentiles. As these identifications suggest, the tree itself represents the people of God in the broadest sense of that concept – a people spanning both ages of salvation history and

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both major ethnic/religious groups, Jews and Gentiles. Paul makes two points with this olive tree image. The first, and most obvious, is hortatory. Throughout this text he continues (cp. v. 13) to address the Gentile Christians in Rome directly, using the second person singular to make his address all the more pointed. The olive tree image makes clear that the Gentiles' very spiritual existence depends on their partaking of the tree whose indispensable nourishing roots are planted in the soil of Jewish patriarchs and promises and to which, therefore, Jews naturally belong. This being the case, any boasting on the part of the Gentile Christians is clearly out of place: whether it is boasting over Jews (v. 18) or boasting about their own spiritual accomplishments (vv. 19-22). Paul's second purpose is didactic. By emphasizing the ease with which natural branches can be grafted back into 'their own' olive tree (vv. 23-24), Paul provides further support for his key theme in 11:11-32; hope for a spiritual future for Israel.

Robertson: This passage, with its reference to the regrafting of Israel, is frequently interpreted in terms of a distinctive future for ethnic Israel. It is assumed that the figure of regrafting necessarily implies corporate inclusion at a future time when God will deal especially with Israel. However, the argumentation of Paul specifically parallels the experience of Israelite believers with that of contemporary Gentile believers. Gentiles currently are being 'grafted in' among the people of God to receive the blessings of redemption as they believe (v. 20). In grafting occurs when they exercise faith. What happens to formerly unbelieving Jewish people who believe? As they are provoked to jealousy through the apostle's ministry, what relationship do they have to the true stock of God?

Robertson: Noting in the imagery of regrafting suggests a delay in the incorporation of the believing Israelites. As each Jew believes, he becomes a partaker of the blessings of the olive tree. The current ministry of the gospel provides the catalyst for the salvation of Jews in precisely the same manner as it does for Gentiles. The major thrust of the apostle's argument about the grafting process is that Jews experience salvation and incorporation into God's people in precisely the same manner as Gentiles. Nothing in this figure of ingrafting communicates the idea of a distinctive and corporate inclusion of the Jews at some future date.

1. Analogies of Gentile Inclusion (11:16-17)

a) *The Lump of Dough (11:16a)*

¹⁶*If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump...*

Paul uses two parallel metaphors. The first is drawn from Numbers 15:17-21. In this passage, the Lord commands the people of Israel, after they entered the Promised Land, to offer to the Lord a donation from the 'first fruits' of the 'lump of dough' that they used to bake their bread. Paul's point is that the holiness of this first part of the dough extends to the whole lump of the dough.

'First piece of dough' translates the single Greek word *aparchē*, which literally means a firstfruit offering of any kind, animal as well as grain. It refers to the first portion of an offering which was set aside specifically for the Lord. Before any bread would be eaten by a household, a special portion, 'the first piece of dough' was first consecrated and presented to the Lord (cp. Num. 15:19-21). Although only a portion of that special piece of dough represented the entire loaf ('the lump'), all of which was acknowledged as being from the Lord. In other words, they were giving back to the Lord a representation of all He had provided for them. It is for that reason that 'the lump is also' holy ('set apart').

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Firstfruit refers to the offerings that were brought into the Temple in the Old Testament. The firstfruits were the initial blossomings, the best of the fruit, but the whole crop was consecrated as sacred unto the Lord. The lump is an analogy for bread leaven. A small amount of leaven introduced into a small piece of bread makes the whole loaf rise. When the leavening agent was made sacred to God, holy and set apart, so too was the whole loaf.

To what set of circumstances does Paul intend this metaphor to apply? Since Paul gives no hint, it seems reasonable to look for our answer to the second metaphor in the verse, which appears to be parallel to the first. Can we conclude from the apparent parallelism that ‘first fruits’ represents the patriarchs and ‘lump of dough’ the Jewish people? Almost all scholars agree on the second point: ‘lump of dough’ stands for the Jews. Opinion on the identification of the ‘first fruits’ is more divided. Most scholars are led by the parallelism to identify the ‘first fruits’ with the patriarchs. But a significant (and growing) number think it is Jewish Christians, the remnant. Advocates of this last view note that Paul elsewhere uses the word ‘first fruits’ to refer to ‘first converts’ (16:5; 1 Cor. 16:15; 2 Th. 2:13) and that the OT and Jewish thinkers view the remnant as a down payment on a greater blessing of the Jewish people. If we make this identification, then v. 16 would have even more transitional force, with v. 16a picking up the argument of vv. 1-10 and v. 16b leading into vv. 17ff. While the choice is a difficult one, the traditional identification of the ‘first fruits’ with the patriarchs is more likely. The parallelism, while not decisive, is certainly important; but more important is the lack of solid support in the OT or in Jewish theology for the idea that the remnant would have a ‘sanctifying’ effect on the people of Israel as a whole.

Paul is referring to Old Testament offerings and sacrifices, and specifically the offering of the firstfruits. In that offering the priest took some of the dough from the larger lump and offered it to God. Paul reasoned that if the lump offered to God was acceptable, the rest would naturally be as well. The firstfruit was Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation, and he was accepted before God. Thus it is natural for his descendants to be also accepted. Paul is making the point, how natural the Jews’ return and acceptance by God will be.

b) The Olive Tree (11:16b-17)

(1) Root and Branch (11:16b)

...and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

The ‘branches,’ as vv. 17-18 reveal, are the Jews. Paul does not so clearly identify the ‘root,’ and this has given scope to various suggestions, including Christ, Jewish Christians (the remnant), and the patriarchs. But the last of these receives decisive support from the imagery of vv. 17-18, the somewhat parallel concept in v. 29 – God loves Israel ‘because of the fathers’ (cp. also 9:5) – and from Jewish texts in which Abraham and the patriarchs are called a root (e.g., 1 Enoch 93:5, 8).

Both of the metaphors in v. 16 assert that the ‘holiness’ of the patriarchs conveys to all of Israel a similar holiness. Their ‘holiness’ consists in their having been set apart by God for this salvation-historical role. Moreover, the word ‘holy’ (*hagios*) is taken from OT sacrificial language. The word will not, then, have the technical sense of ‘set apart by God for salvation’ that it usually has in Paul but will connote a being ‘set apart’ by God for special attention in a more general way. Paul is not here asserting the salvation of every Israelite but the continuing ‘special’ identity of the people of Israel in the eyes of the Lord.

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Paul's specific use of the analogies in this passage points to the truth that, if the firstfruits and root of Israel—perhaps symbolizing the first patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob)—were 'holy,' consecrated to the Lord, so were all their descendants, the people of Israel. Therefore, for God to forsake Israel would be for Him to renege on His promises to those patriarchs—something His holy character will not allow.

(2) Natural and Wild (11:17)

¹⁷But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree...

The metaphor focuses on the olive tree, which was very important to the economy of Old Testament Israel. Olive oil was one of the most important, if not *the* most important, agrarian products in the land. The precious olive oil came from olives that grew on olive trees, which were very valuable in the land of Palestine. The olive tree is the most durable of all trees. The roots go deep, and the trees can live for three or four hundred years.

Olive trees were an agricultural and commercial mainstay in ancient Palestine and much of the Near East and Mediterranean areas, and still support a valuable industry in most of those regions today. Olive trees can live for hundreds of years, but as they age, they become less and less productive, and in order to restore productivity, branches from younger trees are grafted to old ones. When a branch ceased to produce olives, a younger one was grafted in its place. That is the figure Paul uses here. The old, unproductive 'branches' of Israel 'were broken off.'

A first point of comment is the significance of Paul's choice of the olive tree to fill out the imagery of root and branches. This probably reflects both its use as a symbol of Israel in the OT and Judaism (see esp. Jer. 11:16) and the fact that the olive tree was the most widely cultivated fruit tree in the Mediterranean area. The 'wild olive tree,' by contrast, was notoriously unfruitful, and Paul's comparison of Gentiles to it may be intended to prick the Gentiles' pride and sense of superiority.

Verse 17 is the protasis (the 'if' clause) of a conditional sentence, whose apodosis (the 'then' clause) comes in v. 18a. There are two parts of this condition. First, 'some of the branches have been cut off.' Here in a new image Paul restates the essential tragedy that sparks Romans 9-11: Jews, the recipients of God's blessings through their ancestry, have been severed from those blessings – through both God's hardening (cp. vv. 7b-10) and their own unbelief (cp. v. 20). Second, however, we find 'grafted in' among the branches that remain other branches – branches that come from 'a wild olive tree.' With this image, as Paul's direct address makes clear (v. 13), he refers to Gentile Christians.

Paul makes clear that 'some,' but not all, 'of the branches were broken off.' That is also indicated by the phrase 'among them.' There always had been a believing remnant in Israel, and many Jews believed in Christ during His earthly ministry and in the time of the early church. Probably until the end of the first century, most Christians, including all the apostles, were Jews. Those original Jewish branches remained attached to 'the rich root of' God's olive tree, as have Jewish branches from then until now. Gentile believers are joint heirs with them and of Abraham.

Wild olive trees were not cultivated and so they bore no fruit. They were worthless, giant weeds, which is how Paul describes us. God cut off the branches of the precious, durable, valuable olive tree and made a graft. The graft He put on the tree was taken from wild, worthless olive trees

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that could not be commended to God. These spindly, worthless, wild olive branches were plugged into the root from which they get the sap, the nutrients. The grafted branches draw everything valuable from the root of the cultivated olive tree. Salvation is of the Jews, and we must never forget that. It should be the deathblow of anti-Semitism among Christian people.

The second point calling for attention is Paul's reference to the practice of grafting branches from a wild, or uncultivated, tree into a cultivated one – the reverse of the usual process. Writers and speakers frequently transgress the natural boundaries of a metaphor in their application of it. We should therefore be content to recognize that Paul has allowed the theological process he is illustrating to affect the terms of his metaphor.

The original 'tree' is a cultivated olive. The grafted branches have no place there since they are a different species, a wild olive. This is a rather unusual word picture. Understandably various attempts have been made to explain the horticultural impossibility of grafting one species on to an entire different species. Most likely, Paul was no authority on horticulture. He is making one simple but very important point. It is by grace alone that the Gentiles are included, grafted in to the tree of historic Israel.

2. Warning Against Gentile Boasting (11:18-22)

a) *Don't Boast Over Jews (11:18)*

...¹⁸*do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you.*

The prohibition 'do not boast over the branches' completes the conditional sentence begun in v. 17. The verb 'boast over' (*κατακαυχασθαι, katakanchaomai*) combines the ideas of sinful pride and arrogant superiority. The 'others' over whom the Gentile Christians are not to exult are 'the branches.' But does Paul have in mind the branches that have been broken off the tree (unbelieving Jews), the branches that remain in the tree (Jewish Christians), or both? Probably both. Paul's comparison between the Gentile Christians who stand in God's grace by their faith with Jews who have been cut off because of their unbelief (vv. 20-22) shows that he must have unbelieving Jews in mind. Yet 14:1-15:13 manifests a concern to reconcile Jews and Gentiles within the church; and Paul almost certainly has this situation in mind even here.

A little reading between the lines leads us to detect in Paul's words a degree of pride on the part of some Gentile believers in Rome, and with it perhaps some haughtiness in regard to their predecessors in Israel. Arrogance towards predecessors is not uncommon as it is easy to regard those who have gone before us, whether in our churches or in the broader society, as inferior. We easily think we know better or do better than them.

The Gentiles themselves were not the source of blessing any more than believing Jews had been. Believing Gentiles are blessed by God because they are the spiritual descendants of faithful Abraham. We are blessed because we have been grafted into the covenant of salvation that God made with Abraham and now graciously offers to all who believe in Abraham's God. The blessing of both Jewish and Gentile believers comes through the root of God's covenant promises and power. It is tragic and lamentable that, throughout much of church history, Jewish converts to Christ have often been subjected to attitudes of Gentile superiority and been shunned or reluctantly accepted into Christian fellowship.

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Gentile Christians who boast over Jews are demonstrating an attitude of disdain for the Jewish heritage. Yet it is that very heritage upon which the Gentile Christians themselves depend for their own spiritual standing. For ‘the root’ that gives spiritual nourishment to Jewish and Gentile believers alike is the patriarchs as recipients and transmitters of the promises of God. And that root is not only of historical interest. As the present tense Paul uses here indicates, the root of the patriarchs continues to be the source of spiritual nourishment that believers require. There is only one root and only one tree; branches, whether Jewish or Gentile, that do not remain attached to that tree are doomed to wither and die. Here again we see the careful balance of Paul’s argument in Romans. Physical descent from the patriarchs does not, in itself, bring salvation (2:25-29; 9:6b-29); Jews are in the same position as Gentiles, held under sin’s power (2:1-3:20) and needing to respond to God in faith to be saved (3:21-4:25). Yet salvation comes only to those who are of ‘Abraham’s seed’: the people of God are one, and that people has both a Jewish root and a continuing Jewish element.

b) Don’t Boast Over Accomplishments (11:19-22)

(1) Exhortation (11:19-20)

¹⁹Then you will say, ‘Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.’ ²⁰That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear.

In good diatribe style, Paul now puts a further argument on the lips of a hypothetical Gentile Christian who seeks to justify his feeling of superiority over the Jews. Paul responds with a qualified agreement. He does not straightforwardly deny the point that the Gentile Christian has made; for, indeed, as Paul himself has argued, the hardening of Jews has led to the extension of salvation to Gentiles (vv. 11-15). But Paul also argues that this salvation is, in turn, designed to stimulate Jews to jealousy as the means of their spiritual restoration. God’s purposes in ‘cutting off’ natural branches extend far beyond the inclusion of Gentiles. It is the egotism of Gentile Christians who present God’s manifold plan as having the salvation of themselves as its focus that Paul wishes to expose and criticize.

Another facet of the egotism of the Gentile Christians is their sense of pride in having attained a place in the people of God. This attitude Paul seeks to deflate by reminding them that it is faith that makes the difference. It is because of their lack of faith that so many Jews have been ‘cut off’; and it is through faith that the Gentile Christian has attained a standing within the people of God. What Paul says here to the Gentile Christian echoes what he said earlier to the Jews. In response to the Jews’ tendency to boast in their status and accomplishments, Paul emphasized that the gracious nature of God’s dealings with human beings excluded all boasting. It is faith, and faith alone – characterized by humility and receptivity – that is the only way to establish or to maintain a relationship with God (3:27-4:5). Recognizing that every spiritual benefit comes as a sheer gift from our gracious God, the Gentile Christian must stop thinking so highly of his or her accomplishments and take up an attitude of fear. This basic biblical concept combines reverential respect for the God of majesty and glory with a healthy concern to continue to live out the grace of God in or lives (see esp. Phil. 2:12; also 2 Cor. 5:1; 7:1, 11, 15; Col. 3:22).

In other words, the breaking off and grafting in were based on belief, not on any inherent racial or national inferiority or superiority. The issue is not worthiness and it is not racial, ethnic, social, intellectual, or even moral. The only issue is ‘faith.’ The Jews ‘were broken off’ because

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of their ‘unbelief,’ and Gentiles who believed were ‘grafted in,’ that is, made to ‘stand,’ on the basis of their ‘faith’ in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is speaking to a unique historical context long since passed. Nonetheless, I should take note that I, too, am ‘grafted in’ to God’s people only by God’s kindness. But this calls for ongoing faith, humility before God, and holy fear.

(2) Warning (11:21-22)

²¹For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. ²²Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

Paul now explains why the Gentile Christian should fear. A failure to continue in faith – thus a failure to display an appropriate ‘fear’ of God – has led to judgment for many Jews. And if God so judged Jews, who had a natural connection to the tree and its sustaining root, He will surely judge those who have been grafted in as alien branches.

If Israel’s special calling and blessing from the Lord could not protect them from being broken off, then certainly the Gentiles’ lack of that calling and blessing cannot protect them from being broken off for their disbelief. Therefore you would do well, Paul advises his Gentile readers, to have a righteous ‘fear’ and to strongly resist any temptation to arrogance (v. 18) and conceit (v. 20).

Paul’s emphasis on God’s goodness’ makes clear that the representative Gentile Christian he addresses has been ‘grafted into’ God’s people (vv. 17 and 19) and thus ‘stands’ (v. 20) in faith through God’s gracious initiative. The reference to God’s ‘severity,’ on the other hand, reinforces the note of condemnation found in the ‘not spare’ of v. 21. By denoting those upon whom God’s severity is visited as ‘those who have fallen,’ Paul draws our attention back to an even earlier verse (v. 11). But Paul’s main purpose in this verse appears at its end: to repeat his warning to the Gentile believer who may (like the Jew; cp. 2:4-5) presume on God’s goodness. For the goodness of God is not simply a past act or automatic benefit on which the believer can rest secure; it is also a continuing relationship in which the believer must remain. ‘Otherwise’ – that is, if the believer does not continue in the goodness of God – the believer will, like the Jew, be ‘cut off’ – severed forever from the people of God and eternally condemned. In issuing this warning, Paul echoes a consistent NT theme: ultimate salvation is dependent on continuing faith; therefore, the person who ceases to believe forfeits any hope of salvation (cp. also 8:13; Col. 1:23; Heb. 3:6, 14).

‘Severity’ translates *apotomia*, which has the root meaning of cutting right off, or cutting quickly, and corresponds to the verb *ekkoptō* (‘cut off’), with which this verse ends. And in this context, *piptō* (‘fell’) means to fall down so as to be completely ruined. Paul is therefore speaking of an extremely serious spiritual condition, in which people fell from spiritual opportunity into judgment. That looks at the past. Paul then warns those in the present who have identified with the saving gospel that they must ‘continue in His kindness’ or they, too, will be judged severely like those in the past who were near the blessing and fell. That is a familiar New Testament idea, which affirms the reality of true, saving faith by its continuity. That is the perseverance of the saints that evidences their genuine conversion (see Jn. 8:31; 15:5-6; Col. 1:22-23; Heb. 3:12-14; 4:11; 1 Jn. 2:19).

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3. Hope for Jewish Inclusion (11:23-24)

a) *The Power to Regraft (11:23)*

²³*And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.*

Paul has stressed God's equal treatment of both Jew and Gentile in judgment: just as Jews who do not believe are 'cut off,' so Gentiles who do not continue in God's goodness will be 'cut off.' In vv. 23-24, he uses this same principle of equal treatment positively to offer hope for the eventual spiritual renewal of Jews. 'Those also' can be grafted back into the olive tree 'if they do not persist in their lack of faith.' In speaking of such a regrafting, Paul again reveals how little he is concerned to stick to the details of actual olive cultivation in his metaphor. It is not the logic of nature that explains this regrafting, but the *theologic* of God and the 'power of God' that is work in the gospel (1:16). Paul's stress on God's ability here may seem redundant; but he is probably thinking of the attitude of certain Gentile Christians who might question the appropriateness of God extending His grace to those who had already been cast off.

b) *The Ability to Regraft (11:24)*

²⁴*For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.*

Even though Paul has stretched the limits of his metaphor to the breaking point, he continues to exploit it to give further reason for God's ability to restore Jews who turn from unbelief to belief. Paul utilizes the familiar 'how much more' argument. If God can so graft branches into the cultivated olive tree that do not naturally belong to it, He is certainly able to graft back into this tree those branches who do belong to that tree by nature – Jews. For it is, after all, 'their own' tree.

The normal practice was to upgrade a wild olive tree by grafting healthy fruit-producing branches to it. While grafting does not affect the rest of the tree, the new branches become very productive. But here Paul talks about grafting wild, *fruitless* branches onto a good tree, something he knew was 'contrary to nature,' but he wanted to make a point. It will be so natural for Israel to return to health because she originally came from a productive tree. If God could engraft wild branches like you and me, how much more a natural branch!

Just as Paul dwelt on Jewish sin in chapter 2 to counter Jewish boasting over Gentiles, so he now accentuates Jewish advantages to counter Gentile boasting over Jews. Paul does not mean that it is easier to save a Jew than a Gentile or that the Jew, by reason of being a Jew can make any claim on God; for this would be to give the Jew an 'advantage' to salvation that Paul has plainly denied (see chapter 2). Every person, Jew or Gentile, stands under sin's power (3:9) and can be saved only by a special act of God's grace. Just like Gentiles, Jews can be saved only if they are grafted by God into the tree. But even when cut off from the parent tree because of unbelief, they retain the stamp of their origin. Their quality as 'natural branches' does not itself qualify them for grafting onto the tree. But, as branches that trace their origin to a 'holy' root (v. 16), their regrafting is easier to understand than the grafting in of those alien, wild olive branches.

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4. Summary

Paul skillfully mixes theology and exhortation in this paragraph. His olive tree metaphor makes an important contribution to our understanding of the people of God. It is notoriously easy to squeeze more theology out of such a metaphor than it is intended to convey. But basic to the whole metaphor is the unity of God's people, a unity that crosses both historical and ethnic boundaries. The basic point of the metaphor is that there is only one olive tree, whose roots are firmly planted in OT soil, and whose branches includes both Jews and Gentiles. This olive tree represents the true people of God. The turn of the ages at the coming of Christ brought an important development in the people of God: the object of one's faith became clearer and more specific and the ethnic makeup of that people changed radically, as God extended His grace in vastly increased measure to Gentiles. But Paul's metaphor warns us not to view this transition as a transition from one people of God to another. Gentiles who come to Christ become part of that community of salvation founded on God's promises to the patriarchs. And 'messianic Jews,' following in the footsteps of their believing ancestors, belong to this same community.

The picture Paul sketches reveals the danger of the simple and popular notion that the church has 'replaced' Israel. For this formula misses the stress Paul places on historical continuity in the people of God. Paul suggests that the church, defined as the entire body of believers in Jesus Christ, is simply the name for the people of God in this era of salvation history – as 'Israel' was the name of that people in the previous age. To be sure, the dual nature of OT Israel – both spiritual and national – complicates the matter, but in neither sense does the church simply 'replace' Israel. As a spiritual entity, Israel is organically connected to the church; and as a national entity, as Paul has made clear (11:1-2), Israel continues to exist as the object of God's care and attention. Perhaps a better word to describe the move from OT Israel to NT church is the same word that the NT so often uses to denote such relationships: 'fulfillment' – the church is the 'true Israel, if not the new Israel.' We thereby capture the necessary note of continuity – the church is the continuation of Israel into the new age – and discontinuity – the church, not Israel, is now the locus of God's work in the world.

What is particularly pernicious in the 'replacement' model is the assumption so easily made that 'church' = Gentiles. This assumption was apparently beginning to be made by Paul's contemporaries. And it has certainly been embraced by many Christians throughout history, contributing (albeit often inadvertently) to the anti-Semitism that has too often stained the name of Christ. To be sure, the gospel, with its exclusive claim about salvation, is unavoidably a 'stumbling block' to Jews. The NT can justly be said, therefore, to be 'anti-Judaic,' in the sense that its claims leave no room for the claims of 'Judaism' to mediate salvation through torah. But the NT is *not* 'anti-Semitic,' that is, hostile to Jews as such. We must remember that, for Paul, the church was both rooted in the Jews and heavily populated by Jews. The coming of Christ did not for him involve ethnic subtraction, as if Jews were now eliminated, but addition with Gentiles now being added to believing Jews. Paul's boundary for the people of God is a religious one – faith in Jesus Christ – not an ethnic one. We must not become so focused on the theology of Paul's teaching here that we miss its purpose: to criticize those of us who are Gentiles for arrogance toward believing and unbelieving Jews and to remind us that our own spiritual heritage is a Jewish one.

Paul's gracious tones towards his fellow-Jews should find an echo in all Gentile hearts. In generations after the New Testament, Gentiles were to treat Jews as messiah-murderers. Holocaust and genocide occurred against the sustained background of anti-Semitism in Christian

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Europe. Paul, however, never sounds that note. Paul's words about the re-gathering of Jews are an implicit goad to ongoing mission ministry among Jews.

For next time: Read Romans 11:25-36.