

XXVI. The Israel of God

December 13/14/15, 2015

Romans 11:25-36

Aim: To understand that God has one people and one means of salvation throughout redemptive history and that the NT church has become ‘the Israel of God’ – heir to the promises made in the OT to God’s covenant people.

[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 is represented primarily by Moo, while Robertson’s view is highlighted in red at each point. I hold to Robertson’s view, although ultimately I don’t believe it substantially changes our personal response to the teaching of this passage – God does save both Jews and Gentiles into the church. As such, anti-Semitism has no place in the church, and the church should not ignore evangelism to the Jewish community. Throughout redemptive history, God has only one people, as symbolized by the metaphor of the olive tree and branches broken off and grafted in. The OT people of God were known as ‘Israel,’ while the NT people of God are known as the ‘church.’ Thus, the church represents, in the NT age, ‘the Israel of God.’]

Robertson: The argument of Romans 9-11 is essentially no different from the argument of Romans 1-3. The gospel is the power of God for salvation first for the Jew and also for the Gentile. The references in Romans 11 to God’s present intention for Israel are pervasive and are highly significant for the total thrust of the chapter. These references do not necessarily exclude parallel references to some future purpose of God for Israel. However, they warn the exegete against assuming too hastily that the entirety of Romans 11 deals with Israel’s distinctive future. Furthermore, since references to the present role of Israel are found in each section of the chapter (e.g., vv. 1, 5, 13-15, 23-24, 30-31), the exegete must take into account the significance of the present role of Israel, regardless of the particular section of the chapter under consideration.

Robertson: References in Romans 11 to God’s present dealings with Israel has by and large been ignored. At the same time, portions of the chapter that could be understood as referring to a special purpose for Israel in the future have been made the focus of attention. But a more careful examination of these passages may lead to a different understanding of the thrust of the chapter.

A. The Salvation of Israel (Romans 11:25-32)

In these verses Paul brings the argument of vv. 11ff. to its climax. Israel’s ‘stumble’ has been but the first act in an unfolding salvation-historical drama. In this drama Israel and the Gentiles take turns on center stage. Israel, the focus of salvation history throughout the OT, has now, as a result of the gospel, given place to the Gentiles: because of Israel’s ‘trespass,’ salvation has come to the Gentiles (v. 11), and God’s riches and the blessing of reconciliation have come to the world (vv. 12, 15). But the Gentiles will, in turn, be replaced in the limelight by Israel, as her ‘defeat’ gives way to her ‘fullness’ (v. 12), her rejection to acceptance (v. 15). The Jews, like

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branches that retain the qualities of the tree from which they were cut, can be grafted back in again (vv. 16-24).

In vv. 25-32 Paul rehearses this salvation-historical drama for a final time. But he draws our special attention to this restatement by introducing it as a ‘mystery.’ And, in contrast to his earlier sketches of the drama of God’s work with the Gentiles and Israel, he now focuses especially on the last act of the drama, the heart of the mystery: the restoration of Israel. ‘And in this way all Israel will be saved’ (v. 26a) is the center of this paragraph.

But 11:25-32 is not only the climax of 11:11-32; it is also the climax to all of Romans 9-11. This is revealed particularly in the themes that Paul develops in vv. 28-32. Here we find juxtaposed the two apparently conflicting factors that give rise to the argument of these chapters: Israel’s current hostile relationship with God (v. 28a; cp. 9:1-3) and God’s expressed and irrevocable promises to Israel (v. 28b; cp. 9:4-5; 11:1-2). Paul suggests that the resolution of this tension is to be found in a divinely given insight (‘mystery’) into the way in which God’s purposes are working themselves out in salvation history.

This profound theological mystery has a specific practical purpose. Paul continues to address the Gentile Christians in Rome in these verses (he uses the second person plural throughout [vv. 25, 28, 30-31]; cp. v. 13). And he leaves no doubt about what he wants his readers to learn from this mystery: to stop thinking so highly of themselves in comparison with Jews (v. 25a). We who are Gentiles should likewise take these verses as a reminder that we are only part of the great salvation-historical plan of God and that that plan has its climax in the salvation of Israel

1. The Mystery Described (11:25-26a)

Robertson: These verses are the crux of the controversy. They anchor the argument in favor of a distinctive future for ethnic Israel. Three aspects of this passage in particular should be noted: 1) ‘hardening in part...; 2) ‘until the full number...; and 3) ‘and so all Israel shall be saved.’

a) The Mystery Announced (11:25a)

²⁵*Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers:*

Paul draws attention to the importance of the mystery he is about to reveal with the formula ‘I do not want you to be ignorant, brothers and sisters.’ Paul uses the word ‘mystery’ with a technical theological meaning derived from Jewish apocalyptic. In these writings ‘mystery’ usually refers to an event of the end times that has already been determined by God – and so, in that sense, exists already in heaven – but which is first revealed to the apocalyptic seer for the comfort and encouragement of the people of Israel. Paul also speaks of a mystery as something that had been ‘hidden’ from God’s people in the past but had now been revealed in the ‘gospel’ (Rom. 16:25; 1 Cor. 2:1, 7; 4:1; 15:51; Eph. 1:9; 3:3, 4, 9; 6:19; Col. 1:26, 27; 2:2; 4:3; 1 Tim. 3:9, 16). Usually the mystery involves an event or insight associated with Christ’s coming and the preaching of the gospel, but here and in 1 Cor. 15:51 it refers to an event at the end of history.

How was this mystery revealed to Paul? Some scholars suggest that Paul received a prophetic insight into this matter as he wrote these chapters. Better is the suggestion that Paul came to understand this mystery through study of the OT in light of the gospel. But, while meditation on the OT was probably an important source for Paul’s understanding, as the OT quotation in vv. 26b-27 suggests, the apocalyptic flavor of the word ‘mystery’ points to the involvement of a special divine revelation as well.

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Paul's purpose for divulging this mystery is a very practical one: 'in order that you might not be wise in your own estimation.' As vv. 17-21 show, Paul's concern is with Gentile Christians who are boasting over Jews and Jewish Christians because of their assumption that they – the Gentiles – had ousted the Jews as the focus of God's purposes in history. 'Wise in your own estimation,' then, will refer not to a sense of superiority engendered by spiritual giftedness or accomplishments, but to an attitude of ethnic pride and exclusiveness.

b) The Mystery Described (11:25b-26a)

Paul describes the mystery in three separate clauses: 1) 'a hardening has come partly on Israel'; 2) 'until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in'; and 3) 'and in this way all Israel will be saved.' What is not clear is the relative weight to be assigned to these clauses. Or, in other words, what is the real 'core' of the mystery? The fact of Israel's hardening? The fact that Israel's hardening is only partial and temporary? The fact that 'all Israel will be saved'? Or some combination of these? An important clue in answering this question is the sense of something new in Paul's argument that his use of the word 'mystery' suggests. This consideration would seem to rule out the fact of Israel's hardening since Paul had plainly taught it earlier (11:7b-10). It also suggests that the focal point of the mystery is not the salvation of all Israel since this was an expectation widely held among Jews in Paul's day. What stands out in vv. 25b-26a, what Paul has not yet explicitly taught, and what entails a reversal in current Jewish belief, is the sequence by which 'all Israel' will be saved: Israel hardened *until* the Gentiles come in and *in this way* all Israel being saved. Some OT and Jewish texts predict that Gentiles will join the worship of the Lord in the last day; and some of them suggest that it is the Lord's glory revealed in a rejuvenated and re-gathered Israel that will stimulate the Gentiles' interest. But wholly novel was the idea that the inauguration of the eschatological age would involve setting aside the majority of Jews while Gentiles streamed in to enjoy the blessings of salvation and that only when that stream had been exhausted would Israel as a whole experience these blessings.

(1) Hardening of Israel (11:25b)

...a partial hardening has come upon Israel...

Turning to the individual stages of the mystery, we find Paul reaffirming his interpretation of Israel's present obduracy in terms of divine hardening. But he also reminds us of God's continued faithfulness in preserving a remnant by indicating that the hardening has come only 'partially' on Israel. And not only is Israel's hardening partial – it is also temporary. For Paul reveals, Israel's hardening will last only 'until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in.' The Greek construction Paul uses suggests a reversal of the present situation: Israel's partial hardening will last only *until* the fullness of the Gentiles comes in – and then it will be removed. But decisive for this interpretation is the context, for Paul has throughout vv. 11-24 implied that Israel would one day experience a spiritual rejuvenation that would extend far beyond the present bounds of the remnant ('their fullness' contrasted with 'their defeat' in v. 12; 'their acceptance' contrasted with 'their rejection' in v. 15; the 'holiness' of even the broken-off branches in v. 16; the hope that these branches might be grafted in again in v. 24).

MacArthur: 'Partial' does not modify 'mystery' but Israel. That is, those who are hardened—the great majority—are totally hardened, but not every Jew has been or will be hardened. As always through the ages of redemptive history, God sovereignly has preserved for Himself a believing remnant. That is the gracious truth Paul emphasizes in the first part of this chapter (11:1-10).

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Robertson: ‘Hardening *in part* has happened to Israel.’ The phrase ‘in part’ (*apo merous*) is often interpreted as having a temporal meaning. The passage is thus read, ‘For a while hardening has happened to Israel.’ But this interpretation has little to support it. It is doubtful that the phrase has a temporal meaning anywhere in the New Testament. The phrase declares either that ‘partial hardening’ has happened to Israel or that ‘part of Israel’ has been hardened. Either of these understandings would fit in with Paul’s earlier discussion of a remnant from Israel that will be saved. Probably the apostle is saying that a part of Israel has been hardened. But in either case, ‘in part’ does not have a temporal meaning. This phrase does not provide an exegetical basis for the idea that God intends to initiate special saving activity in Israel at some time in the future.

(2) Fullness of Gentiles (11:25c)

...until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

The temporal limit of Israel’s hardening is the ‘coming in’ of the ‘fullness of the Gentiles.’ ‘Coming in’ probably refers to entrance into the kingdom of God, the present messianic salvation. Paul is probably borrowing here another concept from the Jewish apocalyptic: the idea of a fixed number of people whom God has destined for salvation. This suggests that the Gentiles’ ‘fullness’ involves a numerical completion: God has determined to save a certain number of Gentiles, and only when that number has been reached will Israel’s hardening be removed. The ‘fullness’ of Israel (v. 12) is therefore matched by a ‘fullness of the Gentiles.’ Interpreted along these lines, Paul’s brief sketch of salvation history in v. 25b resembles very closely Jesus’ prediction of the sequence of events that would follow His death and resurrection. (Lk. 21:23b-24).

Sproul: The word *until* is a timeframe reference. It means ‘up to a certain point in time’ and such a point in time has a terminal dimension to it. Beyond it something changes. When Paul says blindness has happened to ethnic Israel, to the Jews, it has not happened forever. At the beginning of chapter 11 we saw that the state of apostasy in which the Jews had fallen was neither full nor final. Paul reminded us of his own Jewish ancestry as a way to show that not all the ethnic Jews had fallen away from the covenant. Here he points out that the fall of Israel is not only full but also not final. It is not the end of the story. The blindness that has come upon them has a historical limit to it, which is ‘until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.’

Sproul: The Greek word translated ‘fullness’ is *plērōma*; the Latin word is *plentitude*, the plenitude of the Gentiles. Both words refer to something that reaches its saturation point. Presumably there is a point in history where God’s extension of His salvific call to the Gentiles will reach its saturation point, after which God’s relationship to ethnic Israel will change. AD 70 was the end of the temple and of Jerusalem but not the end of God’s economy of redemption for His people. I believe that Paul is saying here and throughout Romans 11 that God is not yet finished with the Jews. We may be on the very cusp of the last roundup of Gentiles. We may be very close to the next step of redemptive history—God’s work with ethnic Israel. I do not believe that God has two agendas, one for the Jew and one for the Gentile. He has one agenda that incorporates both the Jew and the Gentile in His kingdom.

MacArthur: ‘Until’ refers to time, ‘fullness’ indicates completion, and together those terms denote impermanence. The ‘hardening’ will last only for God’s divinely determined duration. It began when Israel rejected Jesus as her Messiah and Savior, and it will end when ‘the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.’ Israel’s unbelief will last only until the complete number of the

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Gentiles chosen by God have come to salvation. The mystery ends when the gathering of the elect is complete. That, of course, is also the calling of the church. Although many Jews have been saved through the church's witness, the vast majority of converts have been, and will continue to be, Gentiles—until their number is complete. That will signal the beginning of events that lead to Israel's redemption, when 'all Israel will be saved' (v. 26a)—a truth that must have filled Paul's heart with great joy (cp. 9:1-3; 10:1).

Robertson: 'Hardening...has happened...until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.' Initially it might seem that the word 'until' (*achris hou*) implies that the hardening of Israel will stop after the full number of the Gentiles has been realized. However, the meaning of 'until' in Romans 11:25 has been wrongly estimated. As a matter of fact, the term by itself cannot settle the question of a distinctive future for ethnic Israel. As confirmation of this understanding, the nature of the 'hardening' must be considered. Paul uses the terminology earlier in the chapter. He asserts that the elect in Israel obtained salvation, but that the rest 'were hardened' (v. 7). By modifying the phraseology of his supporting quotation from the Old Testament, the apostle underscores divine sovereignty in this hardening. Instead of maintaining the negative form of the assertion in Deuteronomy to the effect that God has not given Israel a heart to know, eyes to see, or ears to hear (Dt. 29:4), Paul turns the phrase into a positive affirmation: 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes to see not and ears to hear not' (11:8). Hardening in this earlier verse in Romans 11 is clearly bound up with God's sovereignty in electing some in Israel. Those who are not chosen are hardened by God (cp. Jn. 12:39-40).

Robertson: In any case, the 'hardening' that has happened to part of Israel according to Romans 11 fits integrally into the historical outworking of the principle of election and reprobation. The hardening refers not merely to hard-heartedness on the part of Israelites, but instead to the very mystery of election. From among all the people who are dead in their sin, God in the sovereignty of His grace has elected some to everlasting life, while the rest have been hardened. Since hardening has always been part of God's work of salvation, one should pause before asserting too quickly that it will cease. It ought to be noted that 11:25 does not actually make this assertion. The text does not say, 'Hardening shall cease in Israel.' Certainly the text is not declaring that the overarching principle of God's election of some and hardening of others will someday have no application to Israel. Instead, the text affirms a continuation of hardening within Israel throughout the present age. God's decrees of election and reprobation continue to work themselves out in history. As sovereign distinction was made between the twins Jacob and Esau, so throughout the present age hardening will continue.

Robertson: But what about the future? Does not the apostle say explicitly that hardening will continue 'until' a certain point in time? Does not this assertion imply an end to the hardening? The answer to this crucial question hinges on the precise force of 'until' in 11:25. The phrase 'until' (*achris hou*) is essentially terminative. More particularly it indicates the *terminus ad quem* rather than the *terminus a quo*. The phrase brings matters 'up to' a certain point or 'until' a certain goal is reached. It does not itself determine the state of affairs after the termination. The subsequent circumstances can be learned only from the context. The significance of this point becomes apparent when the nature of the termination is analyzed more carefully.

Robertson: In many cases, the termination indicated by *achris hou* has a finalizing aspect, which makes irrelevant questions concerning the reversal of circumstances that had previously prevailed (e.g., see Acts 22:4; Heb. 4:12). The use of *achris hou* in eschatological contexts also illustrates its essentially terminative character. The phrase carries actions or conditions to the

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ultimate point in time, without stressing the reversal of prevailing circumstances afterwards (e.g., see 1 Cor. 11:26; Mt. 24:38; 1 Cor. 15:25). In the same manner, Romans 11:25 speaks of eschatological termination. Throughout the present age, until the final return of Christ, hardening will continue among part of Israel. Too often ‘until’ has been understood as marking the beginning of a new state of things with regard to Israel. It has hardly been considered that ‘until’ more naturally should be interpreted as reaching an eschatological termination point. The phrase implies not a new beginning after a termination, but the continuation of a circumstance until the end of time.

Robertson: In any case, ‘hardening until’ does not by itself indicate that in a subsequent period of time the partial hardening of ethnic Israel will be lifted. The phrase is more naturally interpreted as implying a *terminus ad quem*. At the least, ‘hardening until’ does not by itself indicate whether God will in the future deal with ethnic Israel in a new and distinctive manner. With this background in mind, attention now focuses on the crucial wording of 11:26. If a clear reference to a distinctive future for ethnic Israel cannot be found in verse 20 either ‘in part’ or in ‘hardening until,’ such a reference can only be found in the much-disputed statement of verse 26.

(3) Salvation of Israel (11:26a)

²⁶*And in this way all Israel will be saved...*

The first clause of verse 26 is the storm center in the interpretation of Romans 9-11 and of NT teaching about the Jews and their future. Three issues must be settled: the meaning and reference of *houtōs* (‘in this way’); the reference of *pas Israēl* (‘all Israel’); and the time and manner of Israel’s salvation (*sōthēsetai*).

(a) ‘In This Way’

We have four basic options in the interpretation of the word *houtōs*: 1) a temporal meaning; 2) a consequence or conclusion; 3) indicating manner and linking with ‘just as it is written’; and 4) indicating manner and linking it to what comes before. Taking *houtōs* to indicate manner and linking it with what comes before is to be preferred: ‘And in this manner all Israel will be saved.’ The ‘manner’ of Israel’s salvation is the process that Paul has outlined in vv. 11-23 and summarized in v. 25b: God imposes a hardening on most of Israel while Gentiles come into the messianic salvation, with the Gentiles’ salvation leading in turn to Israel’s jealousy and her own salvation. But this means that *houtōs*, while not having a temporal *meaning*, has a temporal *reference*: for the manner in which all Israel is saved involves a process that unfolds in definite stages.

Barnett: The word ‘thus’ (*houtōs*) denotes ‘process or mode’ – ‘in this manner all Israel will be saved.’ It is less likely that *houtōs* refers to: 1) a *temporal* understanding (‘and *then* all Israel will be saved’); or 2) a *logical* understanding (‘and *in consequence of this process* all Israel will be saved’). Part of Israel is hardened, opening the way to the inclusion of the ‘fullness’ of the Gentiles,’ hastening the entry of the ‘fullness of the Jews’ (v. 12).

Robertson: ‘*And so all Israel shall be saved.*’ The question under consideration is whether ethnic Israel has a future that will be different from that which Israel experiences during the gospel era. Jews have been saved and will continue to be saved throughout the present dispensation. The question is whether verse 26 speaks of a distinctive conversion activity of God in ethnic Israel immediately prior to, or in conjunction with, the return of Christ.

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Robertson: First of all, common misconceptions of this verse must be removed. The passage is often read as though it were say, ‘And *then* all Israel shall be saved.’ The phrase *kai houtos* is interpreted as though it possessed a primarily temporal significance: hardening has happened to a part of Israel ‘until’ the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; but *then*, after that, all Israel shall be saved. Such a rendering of *kai houtos* obviously answers the question at hand in favor of a distinctive future for ethnic Israel. The present ‘hardening’ contrasts sharply with a future salvation.

Robertson: However, the phrase *kai houtos* simply does not mean ‘and then.’ Instead, it means ‘and in this manner’ or ‘and in this way.’ Of the approximately 205 times in which the word *houtos* occurs in the New Testament, not one does it have a temporal significance. Paul easily enough could have said *kai tote*, ‘and then.’ But instead he says quite specifically *kai houtos*, ‘and in this manner.’ A dramatic recoloring of Romans 11:26 emerges as a result of this more precise rendering of Paul’s actual words: ‘And *in this manner* all Israel shall be saved.’ In such a manner, by such a process, thus, by this means, in the way described, Israel shall be saved.

Robertson: By the phrase *kai houtos* in Romans 11:26, Paul does not look into the future beyond ‘the fullness of the Gentiles.’ Instead, he looks into the past. He recalls the fantastic processes of salvation among the Jewish people as he has just described them. In accordance with the pattern outlined in the previous verses of Romans 11, ‘all Israel shall be saved.’ First, the promises and the Messiah were given to Israel. Then in God’s mysterious plan, Israel rejected its Messiah and was cut off from its position of distinctive privilege. As a result, the coming of the Messiah was announced to the Gentiles. The nations then obtained by faith what Israel could not find by seeking in the strength of their own flesh. Frustrated over seeing the blessings of their messianic kingdom heaped on the Gentiles, individual Jews are moved to jealousy. Consequently, they too repent, believe, and share in the promises originally made to them. ‘And in this manner’ (*kai houtos*), by such a fantastic process which shall continue throughout the present age ‘up to’ (*achris hou*) the point where the full number of the Gentiles is brought in, all Israel is saved. (John Murray says that this interpretation of ‘and so’ in Romans 11:26 leads to the relatively prosaic assertion that elect Israel will be saved. However, Paul is not simply asserting that all elect Israel will be saved. He is emphasizing the fantastic manner (‘and in this manner’) in which this salvation will be accomplished. Paul’s explanation of this manner of salvation for Israel is hardly prosaic.

(b) ‘All Israel’

But what is the ‘all Israel’ so destined to be saved? We can best answer that question by examining the interpretive possibilities, beginning with the word ‘Israel’ and then moving on to the word ‘all.’

Pauline usage makes it possible to define ‘Israel’ as: 1) the community of the elect, including both Jews and Gentiles; 2) the nation of Israel; or 3) the elect within Israel. The first of these options received some support in the very early church and became especially widespread in the post-Reformation period (e.g., Calvin), but has received less support in the modern period. Paul has used the term ‘Israel’ ten times so far in Romans 9-11 and each refers to ethnic Israel. This clearly is the meaning of the term in v. 25b, and a shift from this ethnic denotation to a purely religious one in v. 26a – despite the ‘all’ – is unlikely. But another factor is even more damaging to the idea that Paul uses Israel in v. 26a to refer to the church general: the hortatory purpose of Romans 11:11-32. Paul’s view of the continuity of salvation history certainly allows him to

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transfer the OT title of the people of God to the NT people of God, as Gal. 6:16 probably indicates (cp. also Phil. 3:3). But Paul's purpose in Romans 11 is almost the opposite. Here, he counters a tendency for Gentiles to appropriate for themselves exclusively the rights and titles of 'God's people.' For Paul in this context to call the church 'Israel' would be to fuel the fire of the Gentile's arrogance by giving them grounds to brag that 'we are the true Israel.' Paul would be quite happy to use this language, as Gal. 6:16 and Phil. 3:3 demonstrate, but the rhetorical situation is entirely different in Romans 11.

The choice between the two other options is more difficult to make. Paul uses 'Israel' in Rom. 9-11 of both the nation generally and of the elect from within Israel as 9:6b succinctly reveals: 'not all who are from Israel [the nation] are Israel [the elect].' If Paul uses 'Israel' here in the latter sense, he would be affirming that all elect Jews would be saved. Some have dismissed this interpretation because it would turn Paul's prediction into a purposeless truism: after all, by definition those who are elect will be saved. A more serious objection to this interpretation is that it requires a shift in the meaning of 'Israel' from v. 25b' to v. 26a since the Israel that has been partially hardened is clearly national Israel. For this reason, and also because of the usual meaning of the phrase 'all Israel,' I [Moo] incline slightly to the view that Israel in v. 26a refers to the nation generally.

What then, is the significance of Paul's emphasis that it is *all* the nation of Israel that will be saved? A few scholars have insisted that this must indicate the salvation of every single Jew. But Paul writes 'all Israel,' not 'every Israelite' – and the difference is an important one. 'All Israel,' as the OT and Jewish sources demonstrate, has a corporate significance, referring to the nation as a whole and not to every single individual who is a part of that nation. The phrase is similar, then, to those that we sometimes use to denote a large and representative number from a group; that is, 'the whole school turned out to see the football game'; 'the whole nation was outraged at the incident.' We conclude that Paul is probably using the phrase 'all Israel' to denote the corporate entity of the nation of Israel as it exists at a particular point in time. We must note, however, that the interpretation that takes the phrase to refer to the elect among Israel throughout time deserves consideration as a serious alternative.

Hughes: There is no way 'Israel' here can be spiritualized, considering the context of chapters 9-11. It clearly refers to ethnic Israel, the Jewish people. 'All' Israel, then, must refer to the forgiveness of the whole people or nation, the whole ethnic group in contrast to the saved remnant of Jews in Paul's day and ours. It is the whole people, rather than a small part, that will be converted to the Messiah.

MacArthur: 'All Israel' must be taken to mean just that—the entire nation that survives God's judgment during the Great Tribulation. The common amillennial view that 'all Israel' refers only to a remnant redeemed during the church age does injustice to the text. Paul's declaration about all Israel is set in clear contrast to what he has already said about the believing Jewish remnant which the Lord has always preserved for Himself. [DSB Note: in v. 32, which says 'For God has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all,' MacArthur says that the 'all' shut up in disobedience refers to everyone in the whole world, while the 'all' who are show mercy refer 'to all who repent of their sin and turn to Him for gracious salvation.' In other words, 'all' doesn't always mean 'everybody, without exception.' He gets around this by saying that mercy is shown to all, but not everyone receives it, which in my mind 'does injustice to the text'!]

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Sproul: If Paul is referring to spiritual Israel, he is departing from the way he uses the term *Israel* here and in the preceding three chapters. Since chapter 8 Paul has been talking about ethnic Israel. Does he mean each and every Jew? The word *all* in Scripture does not function the way we characteristically use it to indicate each and every. I believe Paul to be saying that the full complement of God's elect from Israel will be saved and that this will come in a new redemptive-historical visitation by the Holy Spirit when the time of the Gentiles is fulfilled.

Barnett: What, then, does Paul mean by 'all Israel'? Broadly, three answers have been given. First, 'all Israel' refers to *all the elect, both Jews and Gentiles* (Calvin, N. T. Wright). The difficulty with this view is that Paul goes on immediately referring to Jews; Gentiles are not under discussion at this point. Second, 'all Israel' refers to *the ethnic nation as a whole on earth at the end-time* (Moo). Here the problem is that God's purposes had not been co-extensive with the whole nation under the old covenant, but only with elect individuals within Israel (see 9:6-13). Third, 'all Israel' refers to the elect from Israel throughout history (Hoffius). This is the best answer and is consistent with God's choice and salvation of a remnant of His people (11:1-10).

Robertson: Finally, the 'all Israel' that is to be saved must be identified. At least five different possibilities have been proposed. 'All Israel may be: 1) all ethnic descendants of Abraham; 2) all ethnic descendants of Abraham living when God initiates a special working among the Jewish people; 3) the mass or at least the majority of Jews living at the time of a special saving activity of God; 4) all elect Israelites within the community of Israel; or 5) both Jews and Gentiles who together constitute the church of Christ, the Israel of God. Since Scripture gives no hint of a 'second change' for salvation after death, the idea that all ethnic descendants of Abraham will be saved must be rejected. This conclusion is explicitly confirmed by Paul's assertion that 'they are not all Israel that are of Israel' (9:6b).

Robertson: Perhaps the most popular view today is that 'all Israel' refers to the mass or majority of Jews living when the hardening of part of Israel is lifted. 'All Israel' would refer broadly to the nation as a whole, but not necessarily to every individual in the nation. However, in this context, 'all' can hardly mean 'most.' The hardening in verse 25 refers to the historical outworking of reprobation. As Paul says, the principle of hardening means that 'God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see, and ears so that they could not hear' (11:7-8). If a day is coming when the principle of reprobation is lifted from Israel, then every single Israelite living at that time will be saved. If even one Israelite of that period is to be lost, then the principle of hardening or reprobation would still be active. If a time is coming when there is no more hardening in Israel, then the result will not be merely the salvation of the 'mass.' The demise of this principle would have to mean the salvation of 'all' in a completely inclusive sense.

Robertson: Does Paul's declaration that 'all Israel shall be saved' then mean that some day every living Israelite will come to salvation? Such an interpretation seriously complicates matters. First of all, God has never obligated Himself to save every single individual in any group of people. God has always saved individuals in and among those externally organized into a covenant community. If this pattern were changed in the future, it would introduce a principle foreign to all of God's previous redemptive activity, including activity under the gracious new covenant. A further complication arises when 'all Israel' is identified as every single Israelite living at some future date. This complication has to do with identifying Israelites. Who exactly is to be included in 'all Israel'? The assumption that a Jew is to be defined on simply an ethnic

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basis must undergo serious scrutiny. Because foreigners could be added in to the people of God or covenant violates ex-communicated from Israel (cp. Gen. 17:14), ‘Israel’ could never be defined along purely ethnic lines. The idea that ‘all Israel refers specifically to ethnic Jews is fraught with problems. This concept overlooks many aspects of the biblical definition of Israel and contradicts the truth that God does not guarantee that a person will be saved if he possesses certain external qualifications. These considerations strongly resist any identification of ‘all Israel’ in Romans 11:26 with all ethnic descendants of Abraham living at some future date.

Robertson: Who then constitute the ‘all Israel’ that shall be saved? Does the phrase embrace the whole of the church of Christ, including all Jewish and Gentile believers? Or does it refer more specifically to elect Jews who will be saved? In actuality, a strong case can be made in support of either of these interpretations. Both of these views fit into the context of Paul’s argument throughout Romans 11, and both support a valid theological point. On the one hand, it could be argued that ‘all Israel’ refers to all elect Jews within the nation of Israel. The commitment of God to preserve a select number from within the Jewish community pervades this section of the apostle’s argumentation. By the process described in the earlier verses of Romans 11, all elect Jews will be saved. As particular members of the Jewish community are ‘moved to jealousy’ when they observe Gentiles receiving the promises of the old covenant, they are grafted into the true community of God. On this view, hardening has happened to part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles comes in, and in this manner *all the elect within the community of Israel* will be saved. The fact that in this view the term *Israel* is used in two different ways in consecutive verses (11:25-26) should not be disturbing. When Paul says in Romans 9:6 that ‘they are not all Israel that are Israel,’ he is using the term *Israel* with two different meanings in a single verse.

Robertson: If ‘all Israel’ is understood as referring to those particular Jews from among Israel who have been chosen by God’s sovereign grace for salvation, then the ‘mystery’ mentioned in verse 25 may be understood more clearly. This mystery would then be that part of Israel has been hardened while the rest has been chosen for salvation. It would be understandable if all Jews were lost, since Israel as a nation rejected Christ. On the other hand, it might be understandable if all Jews were saved in light of God’s covenant promises to the fathers. But the fact that some Jews are lost and others are saved remains a mystery of God’s grace. No one can fully understand this mystery. In light of this analysis of Paul’s line of thinking, the conclusion may legitimately be reached that ‘all Israel’ refers to all elect Jews. All of the true Israel of God, the elect of the Father, will be saved.

Robertson: However, further consideration leads to the conclusion that ‘all Israel’ consists not all elect Jews, but of all the elect of God, whether of Jewish or Gentile origin. The key evidence supporting this view is found in the phrase immediately preceding Paul’s reference to ‘all Israel.’ He says that hardness has happened to part of Israel ‘until the fullness of the Gentiles *has come in,*’ and in this manner ‘all Israel’ will be saved. The ‘fullness of the Gentiles’ refers to the full number of elect people from among the Gentile nations of the world. But into what do the full number of elect Gentiles come? The answer is unavoidable. Believing Gentiles come *into Israel!* Is that not exactly the point made by Paul earlier in this chapter? Gentiles have been ‘grafted in among’ the Israel of God (11:17). They have become additional branches, joined to the single stock that is none other than Israel. As a consequence, the believing Gentile community has become a ‘fellow sharer’ (*synkoinonos*) in the rich root of the olive tree that is Israel (11:17). In other words, they have become ‘Israelites.’

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Robertson: The same thought becomes a major theme in Paul's later letter to the Ephesian Christians. Once the Gentiles were 'separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship *in Israel* (Eph. 2:12). But now these Gentiles have become 'heirs together' [*synkoinonos* – the same term as in Rom. 11:17] *with Israel*, members together [*syssoma*] of one body, and sharers together [*symmetocha*] in the promise in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 3:6).

Robertson: The full inclusion of the Gentiles into Israel is the other side of the mystery about which Paul speaks (Rom. 11:25; cp. Eph. 3:6). On the one hand, the mystery is that God in the sovereign dispensing of His grace has hardened some in Israel and has saved others. On the other hand, the mystery is that God has incorporated Gentile believers fully into Israel. It is in this context that 'all Israel' in Romans 11:26 reaches its final definition. According to Paul, 'Hardness has happened to part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come in [to Israel], and in this manner all Israel shall be saved.' The full number that are the product of God's electing grace, coming from both the Jewish and the Gentile communities, will constitute the final Israel of God. 'All Israel,' then, consists of the entire body of God's elect from among both Jews and Gentiles. This is the group whom Paul calls 'the Israel of God' in Galatians 6:16, where he insists that Christians must walk according to the rule that no distinction is to be made between circumcised and uncircumcised people (v. 15). Here Paul clearly uses the term *Israel* to refer to elect Jews and elect Gentiles as together constituting the Israel of God.

(c) 'Will Be Saved'

We turn, finally, to the question of the time and manner of 'all Israel's' salvation. It seems clear that Paul places this event at the time of the end. 1) The prediction of v. 26a seems to match the third step in the salvation-historical process that Paul describes throughout these verses ('their fullness' [v. 12]; 'their acceptance' [v. 15]; the grafting in again of natural branches [v. 24]; cp. also vv. 30-31). Since Paul makes clear that this reintegration of Israel is in contrast to the situation as it exists in his own time – when Israel is 'rejected' – it must be a future event. 2) The specific point in the future when this will occur is indicated by Paul's probably connection between Israel's 'acceptance' and the eschatological resurrection of the dead (v. 15). 3) The implication of v. 25b is that the current partial hardening of Israel will be reverse when all the elect Gentiles have been saved; and it is unlikely that Paul would think that salvation would be closed to Gentiles before the end.

We may add to these two points others drawn from v. 26 itself. First, the OT quotation that Paul cites in v. 26b-27 to confirm the truth that 'all Israel will be saved' probably refers to the second coming of Christ. Second, the hope of a spiritual rejuvenation of the nation of Israel is endemic in the OT prophets and in Jewish apocalyptic. This rejuvenation is often pictured as a regathering of Jews that reverses the judgment of Israel's exile and that ushers in the eschatological age. Paul's point seems to be that the present situation in salvation history, in which so few Jews are being saved, cannot finally do full justice to the scriptural expectations about Israel's future. Something 'more' is to be expected; and this 'more,' Paul implies, is a large-scale conversion of Jewish people at the end of this age. The corporate significance of 'all Israel' makes it impossible to reckon the actual percentage of Jews living at that time who will be saved. But the contrast between the remnant and 'all Israel' would suggest a significantly larger percentage than was the case in Paul's day. Nor is it possible to be precise about the exact timing of the conversion of Israel in comparison with other events of the end times, although the fact that it will take place only after the salvation of all elect Gentiles suggests that it will be closely associated with the return of Christ in glory.

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How will this eschatological salvation of ‘all Israel’ happen? Several scholars find in Romans 11 the exegetical basis for a ‘bi-covenantal’ theology, according to which Gentiles are saved in *their* (‘new’) covenant by faith in Christ while Jews are saved in *their* (Mosaic) covenant by their adherence to torah. Such a view, allowing as it does for both the Jew and the Christian to affirm the integrity of each other’s religion, has proved quite attractive to our ‘post-holocaust’ and pluralistic age. But Paul knows nothing of it. He teaches that salvation can be found in one place only: within the one community made up of those who believe in Jesus Christ. There is only one tree, and one becomes attached to this tree by faith: Jews can be grafted back in only if they do not persist in unbelief (v. 23). Jews, like Gentiles, can be saved only by responding to the gospel and being grafted into the one people of God. The end-time conversion of a large number of Jews will therefore come about only through their faith in the gospel of Jesus the Messiah.

Barnett: But how will ‘all Israel’ – so understood [as the elect within Israel] – be saved? ‘All Israel’ will be saved by ‘a deliverer’ who ‘will come forth from Zion,’ that is, from heaven (v. 26b). Most likely, this refers to the *parousia* or ‘second coming’ of Jesus Christ for His people. In our view, therefore, this passage lends no weight to the idea that Israel will turn to Christ at His appearing. The future salvation of elect ‘Israelites’ will not be different from God’s present provision for the salvation of Gentiles. Any notion of a future salvation of Jews apart from the redemption of individuals through the usual processes of gospel ministry is excluded. The gospel is what it is and it will not become something else for the coming deliverance of God’s elect from His historic people.

2. The Mystery Defended (11:26b-32)

a) *Confirmed in Scripture (11:26b-27)*

(1) Quotation of Isaiah 59:20-21 (11:26b)

...as it is written, ‘The Deliverer will come from Zion, he will banish ungodliness from Jacob’...

As Paul has done in the conclusions of each of the other main parts of his argument in Romans 9-11 (cp. 9:25-29; 10:20-21; 1:8-10), he reinforces his teaching with a composite quotation from the OT. He quotes Is. 59:20-21a in vv. 26b and a clause from Is. 27:9 in v. 27. Both parts of the quotation follow the LXX closely, with one notable exception: where the LXX of Is. 59:20 says that ‘the redeemer will come *for the sake of Zion,*’ Paul says, ‘the redeemer will come *out of Zion.*’ How are we to account for this variation? On the whole, it is best to think that Paul is assuming the tradition that surfaces in Heb. 12:22, according to which ‘Zion’ is associated with the heavenly Jerusalem, the site of Christ’s high-priestly ministry. If so, he probably changes the text in order to make clear that the final deliverance of Israel is accomplished by Christ at His *parousia*.

While, therefore, the ‘redeemer’ in Is. 59:20 is Yahweh Himself, Paul probably intends to identify Christ as the redeemer. It is when Christ comes ‘out of’ heaven that He will ‘turn away ungodliness from Jacob’ and thus fulfill the covenant with Israel. In light of Paul’s reference to the patriarchs in the next verse and his extensive use of the OT traditions about God’s covenant with Abraham, we are justified in assuming that he would identify this covenant with the promise-covenant that God entered into with Abraham and his descendants. Paul, of course, insists that this covenant has been fulfilled in the first coming of Christ and His provision for both Jews and Gentiles to enter, by faith, into the people of God (Gal. 3; Rom. 4). But, in a

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pattern typical of the NT, Paul suggests that this covenant with Abraham still awaits its final consummation – a consummation that will affect Israel in particular.

(2) Quotation of Isaiah 27:9 (11:27)

...²⁷ *‘and this will be my covenant with them when I take away their sins.’*

Paul uses a clause from Is. 27:9 to interpret this covenant in terms of the forgiveness of sins. Some similarity in wording between this verse and Is. 59:20-21 probably helped draw Paul’s attention to this verse; but more important is the context from which it is taken. For Isaiah 27, like Is. 59:20-60:7, predicts that Yahweh will deliver ‘Jacob’ from her exile/sins, bringing the scattered people back to their own city. Isaiah 27 notes that the judgment God has brought on Israel (in the Exile) is different from the judgment God brings on other nations; for Israel’s judgment, it is implied, will be both temporary and sanitive (vv. 7-8). The prophet therefore foresees ‘days to come’ when ‘Jacob shall take root,’ Israel shall blossom and put forth shoots, and fill the whole world with fruit’ (v. 6); when God will regather His people and the exiles will return to ‘worship the LORD on the holy mountain at Jerusalem’ (vv. 12-13). The parallel between this scenario and Paul’s teaching in 11:11-32 that the hardening of Israel is temporary and intended to lead to her ultimate deliverance cannot be missed. Moreover, by focusing on ‘the forgiveness of sins’ as integral to the fulfillment of God’s covenant with Israel, Paul ties this final deliverance to the cross, where the price for these sins has been paid (cp. 3:21-26). With this quotation, then, Paul not only suggests *when* Israel’s deliverance will take place; he also makes clear *how* it will take place: by Israel’s acceptance of the gospel message about the forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ.

b) *Rooted in Election (11:28-29)*

(1) Beloved (11:28)

²⁸ *As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.*

The two clauses of v. 28 are parallel in structure. ‘Enemies according to the gospel’ succinctly summarizes the point that Paul has made in 9:30-10:21: through their failure to respond to the revelation of God’s righteousness in Christ, the heart of the gospel, Israel as a whole has failed to attain the eschatological salvation manifested in the gospel. ‘According to’ will then express the standard by which Israelites can be judged to be ‘enemies.’ The ‘enemies’ can have an active sense – ‘those who hate God’ – or a passive meaning – ‘those hated by God.’ Most commentators favor the latter because of the parallel word ‘beloved,’ which obviously has a passive meaning. Perhaps as in the somewhat parallel 5:10, it is best to give the word both an active and passive sense, captured adequately in the English word ‘enemies.’ This meaning effectively captures the dual note Paul has sounded throughout Romans 9-11 when speaking of Israel’s failure: ‘hated,’ ‘hardened,’ and ‘rejected’ by God (cp. 9:13, 17-23; 11:7b-10, 15, 25); for their part, disobedient, unbelieving, and stubborn (9:31-32; 10:3, 14-21; 11:11, 12, 20, 23, 30-31).

In saying that God’s loves for Israel is ‘based on’ the patriarchs, Paul is not of course suggesting that the patriarchs have done anything to merit God’s love for themselves or their descendants. As Gal. 3 and Rom. 4 make clear, the significance of Abraham and the other patriarchs in the plan of salvation rests not on their own actions but on the gracious promises that God has made to them. So it is not because of the patriarchs in and of themselves that the Jews are still

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beloved; it is because of the promise God made to them. As it is by the standard of the gospel that the Jews are now judged to be enemies of God, so it is by the standard of ‘election’ that they are loved by God. It is best to understand the election Paul speaks of here to be the same corporate election of the people of Israel as a whole that he referred to in vv. 1-2. This election is that choosing of Israel as a nation which the OT frequently emphasizes, a choice that does not mean salvation for every single member of the nation, but blessings for the nation as a whole. All Jews, therefore, are ‘beloved of God’; but, as Paul has made clear, this status will eventuate in salvation only for those whom God individually chooses for salvation in this age (the remnant) and in the last days (‘all Israel’).

Sproul: The only reason we are included in the kingdom of God is God’s love for His Son. Our election, our adoption, is always in Christ Jesus. God will visit His mercy upon the seed of Abraham through the line of Isaac because of His promises to the fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We have seen this theme woven throughout this epistle.

Robertson: Paul’s whole concept of the process of salvation history may be understood in the light of interpreting ‘all Israel’ as composing both Jews and Gentiles. Because the Jews rejected the Messiah, they are enemies ‘for the sake of’ the Gentiles. This mode of expression is very strange indeed, and yet it fits perfectly into Paul’s perspective on the relation of Jew and Gentile in the plan of God. As a consequence of the rejection of Jesus by the Jews, the message of salvation has come to the Gentiles.

(2) Irrevocable (11:29)

²⁹*For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.*

The Jews, despite their rejection of the gospel, remain God’s beloved ‘because the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable.’ The ‘call’ of God clearly refers to the election according to which the Jews are beloved. The ‘gifts’ may then be combined with ‘call’ as one idea – ‘the benefits of God’s call’ -- or be taken as a distinct category – ‘the gifts and the call of God.’ The relationship between this paragraph and 9:1-5 suggests that Paul would intend ‘gifts’ to summarize those privileges of Israel that he enumerated in 9:4-5. God’s ‘call,’ then, is probably to be seen as one of the most important of those gifts: ‘the gifts and especially, among those gifts, the call of God.’ The rare word ‘irrevocable’ (*αμεταμελητος*, *ametamelētos*, lit. ‘without regret’) emphasizes the point that Paul made at the beginning of his argument: ‘The word of God has not failed’ (9:6a). Paul began with a defense of God’s word and constancy against a Jewish assumption of assured access to God’s grace (9:26b-29); he ends with a defense of Israel’s continuing privileges on the basis of God’s word against a Gentile assumption of superiority.

By using ‘gifts...of God,’ Paul picks up his words at the beginning of the entire Jew-Gentile passage comprising chapters 9-11 (cp. 9:4). Along with these ‘gifts’ Paul adds ‘the calling’ (echoing ‘election’ from v. 28). Paul insists that these ‘gifts’ and this ‘calling’ are ‘unchangeable’ (*ametamelēta* – ‘irrevocable’). In other words, God’s election of Israel and his promises to the patriarchs were no passing thing; rather they established a permanently stated divine will for this people. The fulfillment of that ‘will’ still lies in the future with the ‘salvation of Israel’ at the ‘coming of a deliverer.’

MacArthur: ‘Gifts’ translates *charismata*, which carries the fuller connotation of grace gifts, gifts flowing from the pure and wholly unmerited favor of God. ‘Calling’ refers to God’s divine election of Israel to be His holy people. God will not change His plan for Israel’s spiritual

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regeneration. Just as God's sovereign grace and election cannot be earned, neither can they be rejected or thwarted. They are 'irrevocable' and unalterable. Nothing, therefore, can prevent Israel's being saved and restored—not even her own rebellion and unbelief, because, as Paul has just declared, her ungodliness will be sovereignly removed and her sins graciously taken away (vv. 26-27).

Sproul: This is one of the most comforting verses in Scripture as we struggle with our sins. When the Lord God gives a gift, it is irrevocable. When the Lord God exercises His redeeming call on someone, it is final; He never takes it back. The supreme gift we have been given is grace, the gift of the mercy by which we have been called and brought into the kingdom and the fellowship of Christ and adopted into His household. God will never under any circumstances revoke it. Even our disobedience, which may displease Him and provoke Him to corrective wrath, will not cause Him to take that gift away. In like manner, God made promises to His people, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He called them and gave gifts to them, and that, too, was without revocation. The sovereign election of God is always and ever final.

c) Manifested in Mercy (11:30-32)

(1) Gentile Perspective (11:30)

³⁰*For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience...*

Verses 30-31 explain how God's continuing elective love of the Jews will be manifest. The argument recapitulates the process that Paul has described several times already, according to which God works out His purposes of salvation in history through an oscillation between Jews and Gentiles (cp. vv. 11-12, 15, 17-24, 25). Paul uses the familiar 'just as' – 'so also' logic to argue that the sequence of 'disobedience' – 'mercy' experienced already by the Gentiles (v. 30) will also be experienced by the Jews (v. 31).

As the second person plural verbs and pronouns show, Paul continues to address the Gentile Christians in Rome. He reminds them in v. 30 of their own experience. They were at one time 'disobedient' to God, as Paul has shown at length in 1:18-32. 'But now you have received mercy.' 'But now' signals, as so often in Romans and in Paul, the salvation-historical movement from the old era to the new. It is not so much, then, the conversion of each of the Gentile Christians that Paul alludes to as the shift to the present era in which God's righteousness has been manifested 'for all who believe,' whether Jew or Gentile' (1:16; 3:22; 10:11-13). Yet Paul's particular emphasis in this verse is on the last phrase, in which he reminds the Gentiles that the mercy they have experienced came as a result of the disobedience of 'them,' the Jews. As Paul has already made clear, it was Israel's 'trespass,' her 'rejection,' that made it possible for the gospel to be preached to and received by the Gentiles (vv. 12, 15, 17).

MacArthur: 'Mercy' is from *eleeō*, which carries the basic idea of having a compassion for those in need that leads to meeting their need. Because man's greatest need is to have his sins removed and be given spiritual life, God's mercy generously provides just that. 'Disobedience' ('unbelief') is from *apeitheia*, which has the basic meaning of being unpersuadable. It denotes intentional and obstinate refusal to believe, acknowledge, or obey. Man's sin, manifested in his willful 'disobedience,' provides a means for God to demonstrate the magnitude and graciousness of His 'mercy.' Were there no 'disobedience,' there would be no need for and there could be no expression of God's 'mercy.'

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(2) Jewish Perspective (11:31)

...³¹ *so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy.*

To form the hinge of his argument, Paul now looks at the situation he has described at the end of v. 30 from the perspective of the Jews with a chiasmic arrangement. As Paul has shown in his earlier sketches of the process of salvation history, however, the Jews' disobedience is not God's final word about them. 'They have not stumbled so as to have fallen' (v. 11). The Jews' disobedience, precisely because it leads to the inclusion of the Gentiles, has the purpose that they, too, might receive mercy.

What is surprising about this purpose statement is the adverb 'now.' For it seems clear from other places in the chapter that Paul does not think that Israel is 'now' experiencing the mercy that he hopes (and predicts) they one day will (cp. vv. 12, 15, 24, 25-26). It seems best to treat Paul's 'now' as an expression of imminence, expressing his conviction that this final manifestation of God's mercy to Israel could take place 'now, at any time.' It need not mean that the event will infallibly take place within a few years, but it reveals that typical NT perspective which views the new era of fulfillment as already having dawned and all the events belonging to that era as therefore near in time. The salvation experienced by the Gentiles means that Israel is 'now' in the position to experience again God's mercy.

Robertson: The threefold 'now' (nyn) in verse 30 and 31 indicates that Paul's central concern continues to be the present response of Israel. Gentiles now have obtained mercy, and Jews now have been disobedient, so that they also now may obtain mercy. The summary statement of v. 32 strengthens the emphasis on the current significance of the Christian gospel for Jews as well as Gentiles: God' has shut up all in disobedience that He might show mercy to all.'

(3) God's Perspective (11:32)

³²*For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all.*

The image of God 'enclosing' in disobedience reminds us of Paul's language about God 'handing over' Gentiles to the consequences of their sins in chapter 1 (cp. vv. 24, 26, and 28). And as there, this 'enclosing' probably involves God's decision to 'confine' people in the state that they have chosen for themselves. But God's punishment, while still a punishment, has an ultimately redeeming purpose: to bestow mercy. Interpretations of this verse go astray when it is wrenched from its context. Paul is commenting on the process that he has outlined in vv. 30-31 (and several other times in this chapter). Considering the corporate perspective that is the basis to chapter 11, it seems best to think that 'all' refers to 'all the groups' about which Paul has been speaking; for example, Jews and Gentiles. Paul is not saying that all human beings will be saved. Rather, he is saying that God has imprisoned in disobedience first Gentiles and now Jews so that he might bestow mercy on each of these groups of humanity. How many from each of these groups will ultimately be saved Paul does not say.

Barnett: By 'all,' Paul means 'all' in the sense of 'both' Jews and Gentiles. In distinctive ways, the members of each people group has been disobedient to the revelation of God: the Gentiles had been disobedient to the revelation of God in the created world around them, the Jews had been disobedient to the Messiah God sent among them. Yet through the gospel God is showing mercy, and He will show mercy to the members of each, both Gentiles and Jews. God is entirely justified in showing wrath to Gentiles and Jews on the Last Day, as argued in the first three

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chapters of Romans. But the gospel of Christ brings the ‘righteousness’ of the end time to those who cleave by faith in Jesus the Messiah, crucified and risen. In His mysterious purposes, God is showing His mercy to Gentiles through the hardening of the greater number of Israelites which will result ultimately in the salvation of Israel, in accord with the promises to the patriarchs. Thus revealed are God’s dominant characteristics, His faithfulness to His promise, but also His mercy to the disobedient.

3. Summary of the Mystery

In chapter 9 Paul seems to teach that God elects individuals on the basis of His pure grace, without any consideration of ethnic origin – a perspective consonant with Paul’s vision of the church of Jew and Gentile as the fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham (Rom. 4; Gal. 3). Yet in chapter 11 Paul seems to smuggle back into salvation history the principle of ethnic privilege that he excludes in chapter 9 and elsewhere: Jews, just because they are Jews, can look forward to a time when a great number of them are saved.

Many scholars despair of reconciling these two viewpoints and conclude that Paul expresses contradictory viewpoints on this matter. For this negative opinion about Paul’s consistency in his teaching about Israel’s election fails to give due attention to larger theological presuppositions and frameworks of reference that enable us to solve the apparent contradiction at the conceptual level.

A critical frame of reference in Paul’s treatment of Israel’s salvation is a distinction between corporate and individual election. Those traditional explanations that treat Romans 9-11 as an exposition on predestination have overemphasized the individual perspective. But some contemporary approaches err in the opposite direction. The situation Paul confronted required him to integrate the two perspectives, or, better, to interpret one in the light of the other. Paul inherited from the Scriptures and his Jewish heritage the teaching of a corporate election of all Israel. But his experience of and understanding of the gospel required a revision, or addition, to this perspective. That not all Jews were responding to the gospel did not itself overturn the traditional understanding of Israel’s election; for that tradition never insisted that Israel’s election required the salvation of every single Israelite. On the other hand, the relatively small number of Jews responding to the gospel must at least have pushed the boundaries of that tradition. But it was the great influx of Gentiles – as individuals, not as a ‘people’ – that broke those boundaries altogether. Thus Paul, like some other Jewish thinkers before him, had to develop a concept of individual election within, or alongside of, the corporate election of Israel.

Once we recognize that Paul must deal with both individual and corporate election in Romans 9-11, it is no ‘harmonizing expedient’ to ask which perspective Paul might have in mind in a given text. Paul has framed his discussion in Romans 9-11 with reassertions of the continuing validity of Israel’s ‘corporate’ election (9:4-5; 11:28b-29; cp. also 11:1-2). But Paul’s key task is to explain how individual election qualifies the nature and significance of this corporate election. This he does in 9:6-29. This text does not revoke Israel’s election, but shows that it does not have a necessary salvific significance. Within the corporate election of Israel, there is operating, Paul shows, an election of individuals. This individual election in Paul’s day is being extended to Gentiles and restricted to a remnant among Israel. But his focus is on his own time in salvation history. ‘Only the remnant will be saved’ is not Paul’s final word on the salvation of Israel.

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Nor does Paul's teaching about the freedom of God to elect whomever He chooses mean that God cannot take into consideration ethnic identity; only that ethnic identity is never the *basis* for God's choice. There is, therefore, nothing contradictory to chapter 9 if Paul in chapter 11 affirms that God, in faithfulness to His own pledged word, will choose to save a great number of Jews in the last days. Paul's reassertion of this traditional hope contradicts his teaching in Romans 9 only if that chapter claims that the election of Israel is exhaustively fulfilled in the remnant of Paul's day or if it teaches that God cannot take ethnic identity in account in His decision about whom to save. But Paul affirms neither of these there.

It is true that Paul's teachings about a final ingathering of Jewish people has no parallel elsewhere in his writings. But this may be explained by the contingent character of all Paul wrote. In most of the situations where Paul taught about Israel or the Jews he was concerned to establish the right of Gentiles to enter fully into the people of God – usually against a Jewish-oriented attempt to exclude them or to impose inappropriate restrictions on them (e.g., Rom 3-4; Galatians; Phil. 3). Only in Romans 11, apparently, did Paul face a situation in which he needed to remind Gentile Christians of the continuing significance of Israel's election.

Robertson: One final point may be noted with respect to the larger question of the future of Israel as it is represented in Romans 11. Nothing in this chapter says anything about the restoration of an earthly Davidic kingdom, or of a return to the land of the Bible, or of the restoration of a national state of Israel, or of a church of Jewish Christians separated from Gentile Christians. On the contrary, the redefined Israel of God includes both Jews and Gentiles in one body. In terms of the spread of the gospel today, it is essential that Jewish Christians recognize their fellowship with Gentile Christians to be a vital element in the conversion of additional Jews. For whatever the wisdom of man might dictate, it is the wisdom of God's mystery that Jews will be converted as they are moved to jealousy when they see the blessings of their God on the Gentiles. At the same time, it is essential that Gentile Christians seek out a binding fellowship with Jewish Christians. For the conversion of Jews will enrich the experience of the gospel by the Gentiles immeasurably.

B. The Praise of God (Romans 11:33-36)

MacArthur: Paul bursts out with a marvelous doxology, in which he rejoices that God's temporarily setting Israel aside glorifies His incomprehensibility. The full wonder of God's gracious omnipotence is wholly beyond human understanding. It staggers even the most mature Christian mind, including the mind of the apostle himself.

Paul appropriately concludes one of his most profound and difficult theological discussions with a hymn in praise of God for His purposes and plans. Many readers of this response to the theological argument of Romans 9-11 think that Paul is communicating a sense of frustration: confronted with the mysteries of election and the future of Israel, Paul confesses that the truth of these matters can be known fully only by God Himself. Certainly in these chapters Paul touches on matters, such as the interplay of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, that are ultimately beyond our ability as humans to understand fully; and Calvin's warning about our limitations at this point are well taken. But we must not push this line of interpretation too far. We should rather understand Paul's praise to be motivated not so much by the hiddenness of God's ways but by the (admittedly partial) revelation of those mind-transcending ways to us.

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This expression of praise falls into three strophes. The arrangement of the material, the short, roughly parallel lines, and some unusual vocabulary suggest that we should treat the passage as a hymn. Paul probably composed it himself, borrowing extensively from OT wisdom traditions, apocalyptic, and Hellenistic Jewish teachings.

1. God Is Wise (11:33)

a) 'Oh!' (11:33a)

³³*Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!*

The particle 'O' shows that the first line in Paul's hymn is an exclamation, an emotional assertion of awe. Paul's awe is stimulated by his contemplation of the 'depth,' or the inexhaustible magnitude, of three divine qualities. These qualities are not intrinsic 'attributes' of God, but are what some theologians have called 'communicable' attributes of God: aspects of God's character that have partial parallels among human beings and that involve God's interaction with the world He has created.

'Riches' probably connotes especially God's kindness as it is expressed in the blessing He brings on undeserving sinners – both Jew and Gentile alike. God's wisdom is an extremely rich biblical theme. But Paul is undoubtedly thinking of God's wisdom as it has been revealed and expressed in His plan for the salvation of human beings. 'Knowledge of God' clearly means God's knowledge of us and not our knowledge of God. The occurrence of the cognate verb 'foreknow' in 11:2 (cp. also 8:29) suggests that God's knowledge here is that special relational 'knowing' which comes to expression in His election of individuals to salvation (and perhaps also of Israel to her corporate blessing).

Sproul: 'Oh, the depths of the riches....' Eternity is not long enough for the creature to come to a comprehensive knowledge of God, because even in eternity we will be creatures, and as creatures we are finite and will remain subject to Calvin's axiom: *finitum no capax infinitum*— 'the finite cannot contain or grasp the fullness of the infinite.' Never in this world or the next will the finite be able fully to contain or grasp the infinite, so as we stand in wonder and awe before what God has revealed of Himself in His Word we are moved to doxology. The depth is so deep we cannot plumb it.

b) 'How' (11:33b)

How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

The second and third lines of Paul's hymn are both introduced with another exclamatory particle, 'How!' The two lines are syntactically parallel – predicate adjective-article-subject-possessive pronoun – and both predicate adjectives begin with the same letters (*anex-*). The first of these adjectives, *anexeraunēta* is rare but seems to mean 'unfathomable,' 'unsearchable.' Paul applies this description to God's 'judgments,' which will not refer here, as the word usually does in Paul, to God's judicial decisions, but to His 'executive' decisions about the direction of salvation history. The word 'ways' in the last line has essentially the same meaning: they, too, Paul exclaims, are 'inscrutable' (*ανεξιχνιαστος*, *anexichniastos*). In synonymous parallelism, then, the second and third lines of Paul's hymns extol God's providential control of salvation history as something beyond human understanding.

MacArthur: 'Unfathomable' ('inscrutable') translates *anexichniastos*, which literally refers to footprints that are untrackable, such as those of an animal that a hunter is unable to follow.

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Sproul: His judgments are unsearchable. To us, the things of God are unsearchable, but thanks be to God that the Spirit searches them for us. That is why, when we come to the biblical text, we pray that God will condescend to our weakness and give us the assistance of the Holy Spirit to make His way intelligible to us.

2. God is Inscrutable (11:34-35)

³⁴‘For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?’ ³⁵‘Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?’

The second strophe in Paul’s hymn comprises three questions, the first two of which come from Isaiah 40:13 and the third (in v. 35) from (perhaps) Job 41:3. It is possible that each question relates, in reverse order, to one of the exclamations in v. 33. ‘Who knows the mind of the Lord?’ would then expand the inscrutable ways of God, ‘Who has been His counselor?’ would draw out the implications of His unsearchable judgments, and ‘Who has given to Him in advance, so as to give back to Him?’ would suggest an implication of God’s riches (= His kindness and mercy).

The questions in these verses are obviously rhetorical, expecting the answer, ‘no one.’ The first two stress that no human being can understand what God is doing in the world. But, as the wisdom tradition from which these questions are drawn teaches, what no human being can understand, ‘wisdom’ can. And since Paul sees Christ as the embodiment of wisdom, we are probably justified in adding to our expected answer ‘no one’ a qualification: ‘no one, except Jesus Christ, who has revealed to us in His own person the plan of God for salvation history.’ The third question moves from the issue of our knowledge of God’s plan to the way in which we experience it. No one, Paul claims, is ahead of God in giving, as if to earn a recompense from Him. Paul thus reminds us that it is only by God’s grace that we can experience the ‘depth of riches’ that His plan is designed to communicate.

Sproul: ‘For who has known the mind of the Lord?’ We cannot plumb the depths of someone else’s mind, but that inability cannot be compared to our inability to know the mind of the Lord (cp. Dt. 29:29). The only way we can know the mind of the Lord is if the Lord is pleased to reveal it. When He does, we can know for sure that what He reveals about His mind is not deceitful or inaccurate. That is why I love the Bible—it reveals the mind of God to us. ‘Who has become His counselor?’ God does not have any counselors because He does not need any counselors. What would we counsel Him about? We do not go to God to give Him our advice; we go to God to hear His advice. ‘Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?’ When God gives us a gift, He is not paying us back for something we have given to Him. What can we give Him that He does not already have? That is the marvel of His grace in election. In electing us He is not repaying a debt. The gift of His grace is given freely from the abundance of His mercy and love.

3. God Is Sovereign (11:36)

Sproul: in this single verse we find the sum and substance of the whole biblical revelation of the being and character of God. Paul sets it forth with a succinct use of three prepositions, each of which is virtually loaded with significance. ‘For *of* Him and *through* Him and *to* Him are all things.’ These three prepositions teach us about the nature of God. Through these three prepositions the apostle is saying that God is the source and owner of everything that is. He is also the ultimate cause of everything that comes to pass, and everything that comes to pass

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occurs through the exercise of His sovereign will. God is not only the means of all things but also the end or the purpose of all things.

³⁶*For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.*

The concept of God as the source (*ek*), sustainer (*dia*), and goal (*eis*) of all things is particularly strong among the Greek Stoic philosophers. Hellenistic Jews picked up this language and applied it to Yahweh; and it is probably, therefore, from the synagogue that Paul borrows this formula. An ancient and widespread interpretation finds a reference to the Trinity in the three prepositional phrases. But this view is now, correctly, almost universally rejected. Paul is clearly speaking of God the Father; and his purpose is to underline the uniqueness and sovereignty of God that has been the focus of these verses. What should be our response to our contemplation of God's supremacy in all the universe? Like Paul's doxology.

Sproul: We begin with the preposition *of*—‘All things are *of* Him.’ In Greek the word *of* is a simple preposition that can be translated as either *of* or *from*. A distinction can be made between these two renditions. Both call attention to a profound truth about God. Everything is *of* God in the sense that it is His possession. God is not simply the owner of the gospel or the world. He owns everything in the world. Beyond this obvious element of God's ownership of all things, we also see that He is the *source* of everything. The first affirmation about God in Scripture is that He is the source of the universe (Gen. 1:1; cp. Jn. 1:1-4; Col. 1:15-17).

Sproul: The next preposition is *through*: ‘For of Him and *through* Him are all things.’ If everyone believed that one phrase, the Arminian-Calvinistic debate would end forever, because this text refers to the means by which God governs and orders His universe. The word *through* has to do with means, the instrument, by which things come to pass. Paul is simply reiterating here what he taught in Romans 8, that God in His providence exercises His sovereignty over, in, and through all things. All things that come to pass in this world ultimately come about through the sovereign agency of God Himself. We need to embrace this because the great joy of the Christian is to know that all things are in God's hand and are being used by Him for His purposes, regardless of the causal means He uses to bring about whatsoever He pleases. There are no accidents in a universe governed by God, in an ultimate sense. If God exists, sovereignty is an essential attribute of His very deity.

Sproul: The third preposition is *to*: ‘For of Him and through Him and *to* Him are all things.’ The word *to* indicates the purpose toward which everything is moving. Where is everything going? What is the goal of the universe? What is the ultimate purpose of all history? In a word, the answer is God. He is the alpha and omega, the beginning and the end. He is the source. All things are moving in history and in the universe to fulfill the purpose of God. One theologian said this last verse of Romans 11 is Paul's version of the *non nobis Domine*—‘Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but to Your name give glory’ (Ps. 115:1). Your destiny has been appointed by God from the foundation of the world for His glory. The destiny of nations, history, and planets and the orbiting of the heavenly bodies have been created, designed, and ordained by God to display His glory (cp. Ps. 19:1).

Sproul: There is also a pronoun, *whom*, in Paul's summary verse: ‘to *whom* be glory forever. Amen.’ The Hebrew word for glory, *kavod*, literally means ‘weightiness.’ It refers to God's significance or value. God's glory is His singular transcendent dignity, which no creature can possess in similar magnitude. The glory of God began in eternity and will continue for eternity. When we come into God's presence to worship Him, the only appropriate response is reverence,

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awe, humility, and submission. The contemporary church all too often displays a cavalier approach to worship. Many have no idea about the one they are dealing with, the one for whom the angels themselves have to cover their eyes when they sing of His glory. Our glory comes and goes but the glory of God endures forever.

For next time: Read Romans 12:1-8.