

# The Redemptive-Historical Dynamics of the Salvation of “All Israel” (Rom. 11:26a)

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## Introduction

Sooner or later, anyone who reflects on the relationship between Israel and the church is bound to arrive at Romans 11. Here, Paul writes that “all Israel will be saved” (v. 26a). Over the years, these words have provoked numerous questions. A theory known as “two-covenant theology” holds that Israel and the church may each follow their own way to the kingdom of God. The Christian does not have to come to God by way of the Jewish people; nor does the Jew by way of Christianity. From of old, the people of Israel have been so close to God that Jews do not need Jesus as the way to God. Each goes its own way; there is a *Sonderweg*—a separate way—for Israel. The way of faith in Jesus Christ is intended for those who are not Jews.<sup>1</sup>

The organization *Christians for Israel International*<sup>2</sup> has as its aim to make Christians throughout the world aware of the significance of the Jewish people in God’s dealings here and now. Its message to churches is that there are a number of important promises for Israel that are to be fulfilled in the near future. One of these is Paul’s statement in Romans that “all Israel will be saved.” Does not this promise salvation to all Jews, whether or not they believe, simply because they genetically belong to the chosen people of God? The faithfulness of God is always greater than human unbelief, especially in regard to Israel.

Yet, on the day of Pentecost, it was Jewish people who were baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah; they were the ones who gave heed to the

<sup>1</sup> Martin Buber, *Zwei Glaubensweisen* (Zürich: Manesse, 1950); Winfrid Keller, *Gottes Treue—Israels Heil. Röm. 1:25–27—Die These vom “Sonderweg” in der Diskussion* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1998). See, however, Reidar Hvalvik, “A ‘Sonderweg’ for Israel: A Critical Examination of a Current Interpretation of Romans 11:25–27,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 38 (1990): 87–107.

<sup>2</sup> website: [www.c4israel.org](http://www.c4israel.org)

exhortation to be saved from this corrupt generation (Acts 2:40–41). The Savior of the world had come for the people of Israel as well. There is no other way to the Father than the way Jesus showed, when he said: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). Christ is the fulfilment of Israel.

Keeping this in mind, this article will explore what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote that all Israel will be saved, when earlier, he had expressed the hope that he could save only some of his own people (Rom. 11:14). How is this modest statement regarding Paul’s own role to be related to his mysterious words about the salvation of all Israel? The exegetical debate is complicated by the fact that there is no consensus on who would be saved, and in what way the expected salvation would take place according to Paul. This article aims at contributing a dynamic redemptive-historical perspective in order to give a new impetus to the debate.<sup>3</sup>

Having observed that Paul writes about Israel, not directly to Israel, and that the mystery that he has in mind is related to his apostolate among the nations, this article presents a careful reading of Paul’s words in Romans 11:26a, in which he demonstrates his concern about Israel as a whole. The subsequent reference to Scripture confirms God’s commitment to save his people Israel, while the symmetric structure of Romans 11:30–31 suggests that God’s work of salvation includes a dynamic interaction between Jews and Gentiles. In addition, Romans 11:32 states that God may have mercy on Jews as well as Gentiles. The redemption-historical perspective behind all this is that Paul expected a conversion of Israel, not in the distant future but as a reaction to his apostolic mission to the Gentiles and, consequently, in the near future. As Christians of the twenty-first century, we all are involved in what Paul envisaged if we give permanent attention to the precious but vulnerable relationship between Israel and the church.<sup>4</sup>

### About Israel, Not to Israel

At the end of Romans 9–11, the well-known chapters dealing with the relationship between God and his covenant people, Paul grapples with the question: How does the refusal of so many of his countrymen to acknowledge Jesus as Israel’s Messiah relate to God’s faithfulness to the people of Abraham? Paul is speaking to certain brothers and sisters in

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<sup>3</sup> For the perspective in general as developed in this article, see Robert W. Yarbrough, *The Salvation-Historical Fallacy? Reassessing the History of New Testament Theology* (Leiden: Deo, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> For examples of Christian involvement in the early history of exegesis, see Jeremy Cohen, “The Mystery of Israel’s Salvation: Romans 11:25–26 in Patristic and Medieval Exegesis,” *Harvard Theological Review* 98, no. 3 (2005): 247–81.

the congregation of Rome, whom he does not want to leave ignorant of a certain mystery. The believers he is speaking to are not of Jewish descent: "I am talking to you Gentiles," he says (Rom. 11:13). Paul is talking about, but not directly to, Israel. In Romans 11:28–32, we find the sequence "they-you-all men," and it is clear that those Paul addresses as "you" are of Gentile descent. Thus, Paul's words take the promise to Israel on a remarkable detour. This remarkable detour to the Gentiles points to the nature of the mystery he wants to share with the Christians in Rome.

### Paul's Mystery

A *μυστήριον* is something that has been hidden but is later revealed through God's dealings in history. The secret, which can be shared now but does not yet point to the final phase of history,<sup>5</sup> contains something unfathomable, for it is a divine mystery of salvation. It is not as though Paul had received a new revelation,<sup>6</sup> or discovered a new insight in Scripture.<sup>7</sup> The emphasis is not on what Paul received but on what he wants to share with the Roman church that they may avoid arrogance (v. 20).

The particular secret Paul has in mind (τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο) relates to the mystery of salvation on which he bases his apostolate to the nations. About this, he writes in Ephesians 3:6: "through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus."<sup>8</sup> However, because the work of God does not reach its conclusion with the Gentiles Paul warns his readers not to be arrogant. In this mystery, Paul has discovered an extra dimension: That which God is doing among the nations also means something for Israel.

### A Hardening/Blindness, in Part, Has Come over Israel

The notion of a partial hardening or blindness is already found in Romans 11:7, where Paul sets the elect of Israel over against "the others," who were hardened. What Israel sought so earnestly to obtain, the elect received. The others were hardened. This, too, is part of the work of God (Rom. 11:25 [γέγονεν]).

<sup>5</sup> See also Rom. 16:25–27; 1 Cor. 2:6–7; Eph. 1:9; Col. 1:26–27. These texts speak about a secret revealed by God and preached by Paul.

<sup>6</sup> Thus, Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), 249.

<sup>7</sup> This is the opinion of Otfried Hofius, "Das Evangelium und Israel," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 83 (1986): 297–324 [= *Paulusstudien* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1989), 175–202]. According to Hofius, the many quotations in Romans 9–11 show that Paul derived the answer to his problem with Israel from the Scriptures.

<sup>8</sup> See J. P. Versteeg, "Kerk en Israël volgens Romeinen 9–11," *Theologia Reformata* 34 (1991): 151–69.

The phrase, in part, could be understood temporally or quantitatively. Elsewhere Paul never uses ἀπὸ μέρους in a temporal sense, and the notion of a partial hardening fits well with 11:7. Thus, in this case, we may understand this to be a hardening of a part of Israel.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the phrase “all Israel,” mentioned later (Rom. 11:25), is generally understood to refer to the people of Israel. After the olive-tree metaphor in the previous paragraph, Paul returns to his main theme:<sup>10</sup> How could there be such unbelief in Israel, God’s own chosen nation?

### Until the Full Number of the Gentiles Has Come In

In Romans 11:12, Paul speaks of the fullness (πλήρωμα) of Israel, but there is a full number of Gentiles also (cf. Luke 21:24). Here, “fullness” does not have an eschatological meaning, the full number of the elect, as is often claimed.<sup>11</sup> The Dutch exegetical tradition has repeatedly pointed to the fact that “fullness” in verse 12 stands in contrast to “loss” (ἥττημα).<sup>12</sup> In other words, the fullness of Israel will be achieved when lost ground has been made up. So it will also be with the nations.

Paul writes this with the end of his apostolic mission in view. He can regard his mission as accomplished when all nations—in Rome all nations are represented (Rom. 15:19, 2 Tim. 4:17)—have heard the gospel. His letter to the Romans reveals Paul’s plans to go to Spain (the ends of the earth), the western horizon of Paul’s vision for the conversion of many Gentiles. Here, Paul’s missionary perspective unfolds to its fullest extent.<sup>13</sup>

The verb “to come in” (εἰσερχεσθαι) has no object here. The coming in of the Gentiles is therefore not the same as being grafted into the olive tree of Israel.<sup>14</sup> Most commentators refer here to the well-known expression from

<sup>9</sup> Hofius, “Evangelium und Israel,” 312.

<sup>10</sup> Textually marked by a shift from the second person singular to the vocative ἀδελφοί and the direct address of the readers in the second person plural.

<sup>11</sup> Most recently in the commentary of Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 700.

<sup>12</sup> G. Doekes, *De betekenis van Israëls val. Commentaar op Romeinen IX–XI* (Nijverdal: Bosch, 1915), 259–61; Versteeg, “Kerk en Israël,” 156; H. Baarlink, *Romeinen II* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 56–57; Pieter K. Baaij, *Israël en de volken. Exegetische studie van Romeinen 9–11* (Heerenveen: Groen, 2003), 211; Jakob van Bruggen, *Romeinen. Christenen tussen stad en synagoge* (Kampen: Kok, 2006), 160. See also: Jean-Noël Aletti, “Romains 11: Le développement de l’argumentation et ses enjeux exégético-théologiques,” in *The Letter to the Romans*, ed. Udo Schnelle, 197–225 [207–8] (Leuven: Peeters 2009). Other arguments against the interpretation of “fullness” with regard to the election can be found in Gudrun Holtz, *Damit Gott sei alles in allem: Studien zum paulinischen und frühjüdischen Universalismus* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 57–59.

<sup>13</sup> The missionary perspective of Rom. 11 is also stressed by Jewett, *Romans*, 200, 202.

<sup>14</sup> Contra Hofius, “Evangelium und Israel,” 191; Van Bruggen, *Romeinen*, 171.

the Gospels, "to enter the kingdom/eternal life." However, these expressions never occur in Paul's letters.<sup>15</sup> Luke shows that the heart of Paul's missionary preaching was that "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). The apostle witnesses a miracle taking place: By the grace of God the Gentiles make up the ground lost to Israel and thus enter the kingdom of God in great numbers.

### So All Israel Will Be Saved

At the heart of this exegetical discussion we find the Greek words *καὶ οὕτως* (v. 26). It is questionable, however, whether the weight often attached to these words is justified. Regardless of how this expression is understood, it must be acknowledged that there is something conditional about it: the text presents a contrast between a part of Israel and all Israel. A part of Israel is hardened, but when the condition—the coming in of the Gentiles—is satisfied, all Israel will be saved.

The phrase *καὶ οὕτως* has three possible meanings: temporal<sup>16</sup> (after that all Israel will be saved); modal<sup>17</sup> (in this manner all Israel will be saved); or, logical<sup>18</sup> (in the same way, all Israel will be saved). Currently, the temporal interpretation is gaining favor and rightly so, for the temporal meaning of *καὶ οὕτως* has been shown to exist in postclassical Greek, and Paul uses it this way elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> It is also clear that the apostle is thinking of a progression in time because "until" (*ἄχρι οὗ*) also indicates the passage of time (cf. the "then-now" scheme in vv. 30–31). The majority of the church fathers follow this line of interpretation using "then" or

<sup>15</sup> C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 2, *Commentary on Romans 9–16 and Essays* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 576. A relationship with the teaching of Jesus may be indicated here. Possibly one could also think of the eschatological pilgrimage of the nations to Jerusalem—from near and far they would come to the Messiah of Israel who is the Savior of the world.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, James M. Scott, "'And Then All Israel Will Be Saved' (Rom. 11:26)," in *Restoration*, ed. James M. Scott (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 489–527; Jewett, *Romans*, 701.

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Cranfield, *Romans*, 576; N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant. Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 249–50; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans* (London: Chapman, 1993), 622–23.

<sup>18</sup> So, for instance, Richard H. Bell, *The Irrevocable Call of God* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2005), 258–60; Baaij, *Israël en de volken*, 251–54.

<sup>19</sup> D. Holwerda, "Heel Israël behouden," in *De Schrift opent een vergezicht* (Kampen: Voorhoeve, 1998), 160–93; Pieter W. van der Horst, "'Only Then Will All Israel Be Saved': A Short Note on the Meaning of *καὶ οὕτως* in Romans 11:26," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 119 (2000): 521–25. Van der Horst refers to 1 Cor. 14:25 and 1 Thess. 4:17 (see also *οὕτως* in Acts 20:11, immediately preceded by the temporal *ἄχρι ἀγῆς!*). One cannot speak with the same certainty with respect to *οὕτως* in Rom. 5:12 and 1 Cor. 11:28.

“after that.”<sup>20</sup> The point is that, not how, all Israel will be saved.<sup>21</sup>

The expression “all Israel” (πᾶς Ἰσραήλ) occurs only once in the New Testament but is found in the Septuagint as a translation of כל ישראל.<sup>22</sup> This expression can be understood as the New Testament church consisting of Jews and Gentiles.<sup>23</sup> However, in Romans 9–11, the name “Israel” is consistently used in an ethnic sense, meaning the Jewish people. Where a narrowing within this group is possible (see Rom. 9:6: Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel.), an extension to others outside the group is not.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, the significant use of “Jacob” in the immediately following quotation can only be a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel. The phrase can also be understood as the faithful remnant of Israel, representing the entire people.<sup>25</sup> This, however, would not fit with Paul’s earlier hopeful speech about the full number and acceptance of Israel (Rom. 9:11, 15). Paul’s question revolves around the fate of a people who have hardened themselves in disobedience (Rom. 11:1): Does a disobedient Israel still have a future? In Paul’s chain of thought, the chosen part of Israel (ἐκλογή; Rom. 11:7) is simply Israel in a nutshell; “Israel” is in apposition to “the others” who were hardened. It is also argued that the phrase refers to every single Israelite.<sup>26</sup> However, πᾶς Ἰσραήλ is not the same as πάντες οἱ

<sup>20</sup> Scott, “Israel,” 491–92. See also the appendix (527). In 44 of 60 citations καὶ οὕτως in Rom. 11:26 has been paraphrased by a temporal expression, such as τότε or μετὰ τοῦτο.

<sup>21</sup> Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), 179. The Dutch *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (2004) is justified in its translation of v. 26: “Dan zal heel Israël worden gered” (then all Israel will be saved). Compare the rendering of the *Revised English Bible*: “once that has happened, the whole of Israel will be saved.”

<sup>22</sup> A Hebraism, for it ought to be translated πᾶς ὁ Ἰσραήλ.

<sup>23</sup> This was the opinion of John Calvin in his commentary on Romans. For two contemporary exegetes with quite the same opinion: Wright, *Climax of the Covenant*, 250; H. de Jong, *Van oud naar nieuw: De ontwikkelingsgang van het Oude naar het Nieuwe Testament* (Kampen: Kok, 2002), 281–308.

<sup>24</sup> Some exegetes incorrectly regard Isa. 45:25, “But in the LORD all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult,” as prophesying an expansion of Israel. This verse stands in sharp contrast to the preceding: “All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame” (for these do not come to God to receive his salvation but to appear before his judgment seat, v. 20). It is therefore unlikely that this prophecy indicates some kind of integration of non-Israelites into God’s people. The parallel expression “Jacob’s descendants” (v. 19) also refers to Israel as God’s people. The point of Isaiah’s prophecy here is that Israelites may count themselves fortunate and glory in the Lord, for he upholds their right, and everyone, willingly or unwillingly, must one day acknowledge that. Compare also U. Berges, *Jesaja 40–48* (Freiburg: Herder, 2008), 431, 439–40.

<sup>25</sup> So, for instance, Benjamin L. Merkle, “Romans 11 and the Future of Ethnic Israel,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43 (2000): 709–21; Christopher Zoccali, “And So All Israel Will Be Saved”: Competing Interpretations of Romans 11.26 in Pauline Scholarship,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 30 (2008): 289–318.

<sup>26</sup> So, Michel, *Römer*, 250–51; Bell, *Irrevocable Call*, 261–63.

Ἰσραηλῖται. Furthermore, in Romans 9:3, Paul says that he would be willing to be cut off from Christ, to sacrifice himself and take the place of his countrymen who live without Christ, for apart from Israel's Messiah there is no salvation. The contrast between faith and unbelief is central to Romans 11. Not to be hardened in unbelief is an indispensable condition for being received again (Rom. 11:23). Finally, the phrase can refer to Israel as a whole.<sup>27</sup> This reading may be comparing "the fullness of Israel" and its counterpart, "the full number of the Gentiles." An often-quoted statement from the Jewish Mishnah says: "all Israel has a share in the world to come."<sup>28</sup> Then, immediately following that phrase, we find a long list of people who, because of their sins, have no share in the world to come. After all, Israel is not a sum of individual persons but a collective entity of twelve tribes<sup>29</sup>; after his conversion, Paul still considered himself to be a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin (Rom. 11:1b; Phil. 3:5). In the visions in Revelation, we also encounter the twelve tribes of Israel, first as a messianic army of 144,000 warriors from all the tribes of Israel (Rev. 7:1–9),<sup>30</sup> and then in the names inscribed on the gates of the new Jerusalem, the abode of all the tribes of Israel (Rev. 21:12). Hence, all Israel refers to the whole of Israel—its twelve tribes together.

### As It Is Written

In support of his statement concerning Israel's salvation in Romans 11:26 and 27, Paul refers to a deliverer from Zion (Isa. 59:20), generally understood to be the Messiah based on 1 Thessalonians 1:10. However, this is too simple an explanation for what Paul explicitly represents as "as it is written" (καθὼς γέγραπται), for several reasons. First, in the Old Testament context, it is the Lord who comes to the aid of his people when there is no one else to help, threatening his enemies and meeting his people as Deliverer.<sup>31</sup> Second, God is the subject of all the quotations throughout

<sup>27</sup> According to Jewett, there is a broad consensus among contemporary exegetes in favor of this interpretation (Jewett, *Romans*, 701). See also Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 720–23; Klaus Haacker, *Der Brief des Paulus an die Römer*, THNT (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1999), 238–39.

<sup>28</sup> *Sanhedrin* 10:1–4, with a reference to Isa. 60:21.

<sup>29</sup> Scott, "And Then All Israel," 518, largely followed by Pablo T. Gadenz, *Called from the Jews and from the Gentiles* (Tübingen: Mohr, 2009), 148–49, 437. See also Matt. 19:28 and Luke 22:30, where Jesus promises his twelve apostles that they will sit on twelve thrones in the kingdom, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Even in the diaspora, Jews who confess the Messiah can still be addressed as the twelve tribes (James 1:1).

<sup>30</sup> Richard Bauckham, "The List of the Tribes in Revelation 7 Again," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 42 (1991): 99–115.

<sup>31</sup> The Septuagint reads three times ἥξει: "He will come." According to Stanley, Paul's argument echoes a Jewish oral tradition, based on Isaiah. Christopher D. Stanley, "The Redeemer

these chapters, as he is in the adjacent quotation—a combination of Jeremiah 31 and Isaiah 27. None other than the Lord himself forgives the sins of his people. Finally, the entire passage builds up to praise God's mercy (Rom. 11:33–36).

Ridderbos, therefore, challenges the view that Paul links this quotation from Isaiah 59 to the Messiah: "Here Zion is presented as the place where God lives, and from where the deliverance he sends proceeds. Even if one assumes that Paul views Christ as 'the Deliverer,' one need not transfer this specifically Old Testament expression to the appearance of Christ."<sup>32</sup> This is the more so because Paul nowhere connects the return of Christ specifically to Zion, even though he understands only too well that the heavenly Jerusalem is the mother of all Christians (Gal. 4:26). Time after time, Paul makes it clear that Jesus Christ will appear "from heaven" (Phil. 3:20; 1 Thess. 1:10 and 4:16; 2 Thess. 1:7; see also Col. 3:4).<sup>33</sup>

In Paul's highlighting of God's work of salvation for Israel in Romans 11, Zion stands at the center of that salvation. That explains why there are variants in the textual tradition between "to Zion" (as in the Masoretic text: לְצִיּוֹן), "because of Zion" (as in the Septuagint: ἐνεκεν Σιών), and "from Zion" (as Paul has it: ἐκ Σιών).<sup>34</sup> God is oriented to Israel and is motivated by it; Israel remains his point of departure. Moreover, in Scripture, *Zion* refers especially to the spiritual center: Jerusalem. As the place the Holy One chose to inhabit, Zion forms the bridge between the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem, the city without a temple, and the place where redeemed humanity will live forever with the Holy One. What does the Deliverer do when he looks upon Zion? He turns away godlessness, renews

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Will Come ἐκ Σιών": Romans 11.26–27 Revisited," in *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel*, ed. Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993), 118–42.

<sup>32</sup> H. Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen (Kampen: Kok, 1959)*, 265–66 (author's translation). Equally careful is Haacker, *Römer*, 242. He points out that the verb used for "save" in the New Testament has more often God as subject than Jesus. For a firmer formulation, see Simon Légasse, *L'épître de Paul aux Romains* (Paris: Cerf, 2002), 730–31: "Malgré la tendance générale de l'Apôtre à christianiser les textes de l'Ancien Testament ... on peut, sans risque de se tromper, laisser au passage cité le sens fondamental qui est le sien dans l'original."

<sup>33</sup> According to some, this prophecy from Isaiah would therefore already have been fulfilled. What was future for Isaiah is for Paul in the past. The coming of the Savior has become reality in the Incarnation. After that, the gospel went into the world from Zion=Jerusalem. For instance, Peter W. L. Walker, *Jesus and the Holy City. New Testament Perspectives on Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 136–44; J. R. Daniel Kirk, "Why Does the Deliverer Come ἐκ Σιών (Romans 11.26)?" *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 33, no. 1 (2010): 81–99. However, the redeeming activity of Israel's God is not limited to the incarnation. YHWH realizes all his promises in Christ.

<sup>34</sup> For the Zion-orientated tradition as reflected in the Old Testament, see Stanley, "The Redeemer Will Come ἐκ Σιών," 133–36.

the covenant, and covers its sins. This is God's salvation in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

### Gentiles and Jews: A Parallel

The symmetrical structure of Romans 11:30 and 31 illustrates the parallel Paul sees between his audience, a people of Gentile descent, and the Jewish people. In the past, the Gentiles did not believe; now they have found mercy with God. This happened because the Jews refused to acknowledge that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel. Now the Jews do not believe. Will God now not show mercy to his own people? He will because he has shown mercy to the Gentiles. What stands out is that "everyone," Jew or Gentile, depends on divine mercy, a mercy that sets unbelief aside. This truth redirects the problem with which Paul is grappling—God's election: God's gifts and his call are irrevocable (Rom. 11:28–29).

The Nestle-Aland edition of the Greek text places the second  $\nu\theta\nu$  in verse 31 between square brackets. Internal and external considerations with regard to this reading balance each other out, but external considerations clearly argue against a reading that includes  $\nu\theta\nu$ .<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to maintain, therefore, that the conversion of Israel is taking place in the present, as some would suggest.<sup>36</sup> How then must we deal with this dubious little word  $\nu\theta\nu$ ? There are two possibilities. Either we do not read  $\nu\theta\nu$  because it does not belong to the original text,<sup>37</sup> or we can regard it as a reference to the future—something that is to happen soon or as a prophetic turn of events that somehow, as it were, draws the future into the present.<sup>38</sup> Either way, it is God's mercy that Paul emphasizes. That is what it is really about.

The textual parallel between Paul's audience of Gentile descent, on the one hand, and Jews, on the other, can be shown in this way with the word *now* describing the present state of affairs (with the dubious second  $\nu\theta\nu$  in verse 31 between square brackets as shown in the table below):

<sup>35</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), 465: "A preponderance of early and diverse witnesses favors the shorter reading." Among the textual witnesses for the shorter reading—apart from Alexandrinus and the Majority Text, which represents the Byzantine tradition—the oldest collection of Paul's letters is: P46. Both Sinaiticus and Vaticanus include  $\nu\theta\nu$ . Some minuscules correct  $\nu\theta\nu$  to  $\psi\sigma\tau\epsilon\pi\omicron\nu$ : later.

<sup>36</sup> de Jong (*Van oud naar nieuw*, 306–7), for example, asserts that "(t)his word is essential."

<sup>37</sup> This position was advocated by Holwerda, "Heel Israël behouden," 183–84. For Holwerda, the "unmistakable certainty" that *will be saved* concerns the future is a strong argument against the second  $\nu\theta\nu$  in verse 31. However, this amounts to begging the question.

<sup>38</sup> Bell, *Irrevocable Call*, 283–85 (referring to Ezek. 39:25 and John 12:31).

**Table 1.** Conversion of Israel

Verse 30	Verse 31
you (=Gentiles)	they (=Jews)
once	NOW
unbelieving	unbelieving
NOW	[νῦν]
mercy	mercy
through their	through the mercy shown to
unbelief	you

**God’s Mercy to All**

The word “all” (πάντας) in verse 32, referring to the mercy of God, can only mean: “mercy toward all, both Jews and Gentiles.” Therefore, this passage concludes with the hope-inspiring mercy of the God of Israel for everyone who seeks salvation with Jesus Christ: “For God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all.”

The secret Paul wanted to share with his Gentile audience in Rome is that God has not rejected his people. Together with Ridderbos, we could speak of an interaction between Jews and Gentiles,<sup>39</sup> or, as Matter described it: a wavelike movement of salvation:

Israel’s deplorable fall does something for the Gentiles; in their [= the Gentiles’] conversion the grace they [= the Jews] rejected knocks with renewed and victorious strength on Israel’s door. There is no primacy: God has bound them all over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all. But there is a discernible history of salvation.<sup>40</sup>

According to Matter, that which Paul saw as a possibility in Romans 11:11–15 has now proved to be reality. Psalm 90 is true for all believers: Generations come and generations go, but we have all been included in the mercy of God.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> H. Ridderbos, *Paul. An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 360.

<sup>40</sup> H. M. Matter, “‘Aldus zal geheel Israël behouden worden.’ Waarheid en verdichting rondom Rom. 11:26a,” in *Arcana Revelata*, ed. N. J. Hommesiebeck et al. (FS F. W. Grosheide; Kampen: Kok, 1951), 59–68 [author’s translation].

<sup>41</sup> Stanley K. Stowers in *A Rereading of Romans: Justice, Jews, and Gentiles* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 1994 recalls the homeric tale of the funeral games for Patroclus in Book 23 of the *Iliad*. This tale was in the Greco-Roman world regarded as the founding myth of the Olympic Games. It tells us how Ajax, Odysseus, and Antilochus appear at the start. After a while Ajax is leading in the games, closely followed by Odysseus. Just before the finish, Odysseus prays to his patron, the goddess Athena, for more speed. She hears his prayer and causes Ajax to slip so that Odysseus wins the race. Ajax recovers, succeeds in finishing second and shares the honor. The stumbling of the one gave the lead to the other. In this way God

## The Conversion of Israel

It is true that the eternal God fulfils all his promises but that does not mean that the salvation of Israel happens automatically—it occurs by way of conversion, the acknowledgement of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world.<sup>42</sup> How this might happen has been thought of in three ways.

From a post-historical point of view, all Israel will be converted, in the same manner as Paul's on the road to Damascus through an appearance of Christ himself. They will hear the gospel as the word of the returning Christ (ῥῆμα Χριστοῦ: Rom. 10:17).<sup>43</sup> This position, however, raises serious questions. Why would Paul have had such deep and unceasing anguish in his heart (Rom. 9:3) if, at the same time, he nurtured the hope that in the end all would be well with Israel? Furthermore, would this not lead, for the unbelieving part of Israel, to a reluctant election? Finally, the prophetic expectation usually mentions the restoration of Israel first and, after that, a consequent coming in of the Gentiles.<sup>44</sup> Paul's order is exactly the reverse. For these reasons, this is not a credible position.

From an end of history point of view, "all Israel will be converted" refers only to the end-time, after the Gentiles have been saved, and relates directly to the return of Christ; his coming will remove all ungodliness (= unbelief). H. Baarlink puts it this way: "After the mission to the Gentiles has reached its goal, there will be an opening in Israel for the gospel and a turning to Christ."<sup>45</sup> This position also raises questions. To what extent can the generation of the end-time still be considered as all Israel? This possibility does not fit any eschatological scheme, and it has not, according to Ridderbos, been argued cogently by even one single exegete.<sup>46</sup>

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also controls the race of Israel and the nations. The difference is, according to Stowers, that the two parties in the letter to the Romans are both winners and losers. God enables them, so to speak, to finish equally. The semantic basis in Rom. 9:30–33 and 11:11–12 is too narrow to posit a metaphor of racing there. Furthermore, Stowers fails to pay sufficient attention to the fact that Israel stumbled over Christ as a result of culpable unbelief.

<sup>42</sup> That Paul does not appeal to Israel directly, stressing that the Israelites have to turn to Christ, can be explained by the fact that this passage was directed to non-Jewish readers.

<sup>43</sup> Hofius, "Evangelium und Israel," 390–20; Scott, "Israel," 522; Bell, *Irrevocable Call*, 267–70.

<sup>44</sup> In order to maintain this view, Scott is forced to develop a kind of two-phase system for the restoration of Israel ("And Then All Israel," 493–496).

<sup>45</sup> H. Baarlink, *Romeinen II* (Kampen: Kok, 1989), 66 [author's translation]. See also Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 617–19. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance*, 184–85, makes another restriction. All Israel would not embrace all generations of Israel but would include a particular time limit: only the generation of Jews that was directly confronted with the gospel.

<sup>46</sup> H. Ridderbos, *Israël. II: Israël in het Nieuwe Testament, in het bijzonder volgens Romeinen 9–11* (The Hague: Van Keulen, 1955), 59–62 (with reference to Paul's argument in Rom. 10:14–17).

From the redemptive-historical point of view, “all Israel will be converted” refers to the preaching of Paul and other evangelists, once their mission to the Gentiles has been completed. Both Matter<sup>47</sup> and Johannes Munck<sup>48</sup> have advanced this possibility. It was argued, however, that “hearing the gospel” and “entering the kingdom” (Munck’s solution) are not the same thing. Because Paul does not use the expression “entering” in a descriptive sense elsewhere, Munck suggests it must simply mean “coming to.” This forced construction is unsatisfactory. The objection against Matter’s solution is that verse 26 seems to refer to the return of Jesus Christ. The objection fails exegetically because this verse does not so much deal with the coming Messiah as it does with God’s work of salvation, which has Zion as its center. This, therefore, remains a possible reading.

Although the redemptive-historical approach provides the best perspective, it needs to be augmented with a future-directed dynamic. Paul prepared a foundation for further construction in the future, a future that was at hand. It is possible that Paul saw the history of redemption and the end-time as existing on the same line. Jesus Christ himself had indicated this when he said: “this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come” (Matt. 24:14; Mark 13:10). For the apostle Paul, this was entirely consistent with his missionary strategy: first the Jews and then the Gentiles. Then why not, by extension, make another move toward the Jews, either by himself or by his successors? In the end, Paul’s hope was that not merely a few individuals (cf. the modest expression of 11:14) but all Israel, aroused to envy by the conversion of so many Gentiles, might as yet surrender to the gospel.

Three factors, however, ensured that things went differently from what Paul had hoped. First, his journey to Spain did not bring about the anticipated breakthrough. For whatever reason, this journey was not especially successful, and no church in Spain claims to have been established by Paul himself.<sup>49</sup> What is more, the time of God’s plan proved to be much longer than expected. The passing away of the present form of this world (1 Cor. 7:29–31) took much longer than Paul had envisaged. Second, there was little in the Christianized world to arouse the Jews to envy. Christianity and paganism intermingled and non-Jewish Christians claimed exclusive

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<sup>47</sup> Matter concludes that the world-shaking breakthrough to the Gentiles took place in the first four centuries of Christendom: “The *πλῆρωμα* of the Gentiles (alas,) lies behind us.” (“Aldus zal geheel Israël behouden worden,” 68 [author’s translation]). In this view, a missionary orientation to the future is lacking, for Matter opposes the notion that God has assigned Israel a permanent place in the history of salvation.

<sup>48</sup> Johannes Munck, *Paulus und die Heilsgeschichte* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1954); idem, *Christus und Israel: eine Auslegung von Röm 9–11* (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1956).

<sup>49</sup> Most researchers consider it likely that Paul did travel to Spain. For detailed information about Spain as the final destination of the apostle Paul, see Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Urchristliche Mission* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus, 2002), 1214–25.

authority to explain the Scriptures. Jews were accused of deicide. In spite of Paul's warnings, Gentile Christians "had" become arrogant; they believed God's work had reached its culmination with them. Third, the Jews continued to be deeply obstinate. In Isaiah's words, the people of God's choice had always been a disobedient and obstinate people (Isa. 65:2, quoted in Rom. 10:21). Paul's conditional clause is significant: "if they do not persist in unbelief" (Rom. 11:23), they will be grafted in again. Few Jews met this condition; Jews who confess Christ as the Messiah are still very much in the minority.

### Conclusion

Was Paul mistaken? I believe not. In view of the divine mystery of salvation that formed the foundation for his apostolate, Paul's expectations were justified. Behind the future for the Gentiles with Jesus Christ, Paul also saw a future for his own people. What Paul shared with the congregation in Rome about the salvation of Israel had a prophetic perspective more complex than he imagined. The redemptive-historical and missionary significance of his words have proved to reach right into our own time.

The foregoing study of all Israel leaves us with the question: What are the consequences for contemporary Christianity? The search for an answer to this question should include the following considerations. First, in his patient dealings with the world, God allows time for repentance, and that is our salvation (2 Peter 3:8–9) for all who live by faith in the coming of the kingdom. As we pray for its coming, we are called to show others that there is no other name given under heaven by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Whether our audience is of Jewish or Gentile descent, outside of Jesus Christ there is no salvation. This worldwide appeal becomes the more urgent as the centuries pass. Second, we should acknowledge the anguish of Paul's heart because of Israel (Rom. 9:2). There are many points of contact between church and synagogue, but each contributes tensions. As it grieves us that we cannot share the joy of Jesus Christ with all Jews, so our hands should stretch out to a disobedient and obstinate people (see Rom. 10:21). That will lead to intensive prayer for Israel. What is more, we must seek to draw Israel to its own Messiah.<sup>50</sup> The question is: Do we Gentile Christians arouse any envy among Israel? That is precisely what Paul commends to his audience in Romans 12; Christian conduct in faith and life may be the instrument for Jews to become receptive to the gospel of Christ. Finally, Jews who confess the Messiah deserve our support; they understand Paul's existential yearning for his people more than we do. Christians too often regard them as an oddity within the church.

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<sup>50</sup> The conversion of Israel does not take place without the mediation of the Gentiles. See A. van de Beek, *De kring om de Messias. Israël als volk van de lijdende Heer* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2002), 220–22.

Must these Christian Jews assimilate into the Gentile majority, or may they preserve their Jewish identity? Neither may we forget fellow-Christians of Arabic descent who since time immemorial have lived in the land.<sup>51</sup> Will the church nurture those of her children who are descended from Jacob and Ishmael?

Our understanding of Romans 11:26 shows us that twenty-first-century Christians may be fully involved in what Paul envisaged when he wrote his letter to the church in Rome. Throughout the ages, the relationship between Israel and the church continues to deserve careful attention. Our Christian responsibility in this regard is impelled by the expectation that Paul expresses concerning the salvation of all Israel: *Ora et labora*. In so doing, we may confidently place both our futures in God's hands. May messianic peace be the portion of us all.

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<sup>51</sup> As van de Beek puts it: "But Palestinian Christians are the forgotten among the forgotten" (*De kring om de Messias*, 392 [author's translation]).