

Romans 11:1-36

The Future of Israel

A. Notes on the Text

Much has been written about chapters 9-11, especially chapter 11. But in spite of the extensive exegetical discussions, there are still many differences of opinion, also among Reformed exegetes.

In presenting my opinion, I do not claim that it is the only way to view this text.

Verse 1

The preceding passages may give the impression that the LORD rejected Israel, the Jewish people of Paul's day, because of unbelief. Hence this question by way of interruption. In the original the question was posed in such a way as to solicit a negative answer: Surely God has not rejected his people? Definitely not! Rejected means, cast off, the LORD has broken the relationship with his people completely and will never again accept them, or any of them. Proof for the denial of such a rejection is Paul himself: he first rejected Christ, but was later accepted.

Verse 2

Israel's unfaithfulness does not nullify God's faithfulness; God will fulfil his purpose according to his election. "Foreknew" means that God in his counsel fore-ordained Israel as his people, hence, it is election in the LORD's eternal counsel. "Knowing" is a merciful and purposeful knowing; God's positive predestination to salvation. God's loving communion with his people is dominant.

Note that Paul does not write that God has not rejected some, or even many, of Israel, but that he has not rejected his people, the whole nation. As is clear from what follows, Paul means that God saves the whole by saving a few, or some (Paul, seven thousand, a remnant). It may seem strange that a "remnant" is called a "whole." To us that is a contradiction, but to God it is not.

Verses 3, 4

Elijah was more pessimistic than the LORD! Seven thousand is a round number. Numerically it does not seem all that many among so many Israelites, but it is the full number (seven!) of God's elect and it is always more than we often think.

Verse 5

"Too": under the old covenant there was a "remnant" according to God's election, and that is also the case in the new dispensation, in Paul's time, namely, Paul and a certain number of Jews all over the Roman Empire who accept Christ. The apostle saw it everywhere. In this "remnant" of Jews "all of Israel", the nation as a whole is saved.

If those "few" (v. 3) were not saved, then also the whole would be lost. In these "few" the Jews still have a spiritual future before the LORD; God's purpose and grace regarding Israel are not yet finalized! (See Glossary #27.)

Verse 6

The basic reason for the salvation of the Jews as a whole in the "few", the "remnant", lies in God's electing grace, in his good pleasure, love and mercy, and not in the works of the law of those involved. Grace completely excludes works!

Verse 7

In the Old Testament God's election separated and made distinction among Israel, and it still does that in the new dispensation after Pentecost: the elect among the Jews received and still receive what they sought and seek (namely, righteousness before God), and the other part ("the remainder") were and are still hardened by God in their unbelief. Scripture, beginning in the Old Testament and continuing even more clearly in the New Testament, teaches us that we ought to differentiate between Israel according to the flesh (Romans 9:5) and the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16); between him who is a Jew inwardly and him who is a Jew outwardly (Romans 2:28, 29); between circumcision of the flesh and circumcision of the heart (Isaiah 44; and Romans 2:29); between those who say they are Jews and are not, but lie (Revelation 3:9) and Israelites in whom there is no guile (John 1 :47); between those who are descended from Israel and those who belong to Israel (Romans 9:6).

We should take into account that in chapters 9-11 Paul, when speaking of "Israel," does not always mean all the individual people, but sometimes the elect part of Israel. That elect part is the true Israel. And, jumping ahead to vv. 25 and 26 a moment, this chosen part is "all Israel [that] will be saved." Thus we may read: what Israel (also the Jews in Paul's time) seeks (viz. righteousness before God) it has not obtained, but the elect part did.

Verses 8-10

These verses contain some quotations about the hardening of Israel, viz. three passages from the three parts into which the Jews divide the Old Testament: from the Law (Torah), Deuteronomy 29:4; from the Prophets, Isaiah 29:10; from the Scriptures, Psalm 69:23,24. That means: all of Scripture speaks about it. The hardening of the "rest" of Israel occurs by virtue of God's election and reprobation, which do not, however exclude, but include the responsibility of this "rest." For, the context of these texts makes it clear that this hardening by God is always a judgment over the stiff-necked unbelief of that "rest". (See Glossary #11.)

Verse 11

Stumbling (over something) is not the same as falling (which, in this context means falling into eternal perdition). Thus, we should read the question as follows: Did the Jews stumble so that they fell into eternal perdition?

Paul replies in the negative (as he also did in vv. 1-7). The consequence of the fact that the Jews took offence at and rejected the Christ was that the salvation of Christ would pass to the Gentiles; that happened to make the Jews jealous of the riches of Christ's redemption.

There is thus a kind of undulatory effect. In Noah all nations of the earth were permitted to share in God's salvation, but the nations rejected it and therefore God gave it to the nation, Israel, temporarily. Now that Israel rejects Christ, salvation surges again over all nations, and when the "remnant" of Israel turn to Christ, it will surge back to Israel.

Verse 12

"Their loss" (cf. "their failure" [RSV]; "the diminishing of them" [KJV]). This refers to the setback of the Jews, the fact that they are falling behind the number of those who receive salvation in Christ.

This shows that God no longer favours Israel as he did in the Old Testament. Israel is now placed on the same footing as the other nations, from which also "only" "a remnant" is chosen. They are put on the same plane, as appears from the reference to the "fullness" i.e. a full number, of elect, chosen from the Jews and from the Gentiles (see vv. 12 and 25).

"World" is the nations outside Israel.

"How much greater riches will their fullness bring": When after Pentecost the LORD also brings the full number of the elect out of the Jews to faith in Christ, it will not be a diminution of salvation for the Gentiles, but will provide them with greater riches. Why? Because, since the reduction in the number of elect Jews already delivers riches for the Gentiles, they can expect much more from an increase in the numbers of elect Jews. For if the LORD saves a full number of unbelieving and stubborn Jews, how much more will he not do for the Gentiles who were not so stubborn in their unbelief?

Verses 13, 14

D. Holwerda paraphrases this as follows:

And I want to tell you this, Gentiles: with my abilities as apostle to the Gentiles, limited as they are, I do contribute to the salvation of some, albeit a few, Israelites. I take pride in my ministry, in the hope that I may arouse my own people to envy.¹

"Some of them": the apostle's expectations are not high. He means: compared to the great number of Jews (in Paul's time about 6 million) the number of believers in Christ is only small. These "some" are, also for Paul, the full number of elect from the Jews. When Paul leaves the synagogue to go to the Gentiles (see Acts

¹ Ed. Note: Quote is from *O diepte des rijkdoms* (1949).

13:46) he continues to focus on the Jews. Although an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul considers the conversion of the Jews as both a crown on, and the glory of, his mission.

Verse 15

"Life from the dead": the best view is that God's salvation for the full number of the elect Jews and Gentiles will be revealed at the resurrection, when Christ returns.

Verse 16

The apostle gives a reason for his expectation for Israel and defends the possibility and reality of the salvation of Israel as a whole, in and though the "some", by using the images of "first fruits" and "root".

The Israelite had to present the first ripe fruits of the harvest to the sanctuary as an offering to the LORD, before he was allowed to use any himself. By means of these "first fruits", the whole harvest was consecrated to the LORD (Numbers 15:17-21; cf. Nehemiah 10:35-38 and Ezekiel 44:30).

The second part says: if the root of the tree is holy, then the branches shooting forth from that root will share in that holiness. The "first fruits" of the Jews were Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Jacob's sons. The root is Abraham. The Jews who reject Christ remain bound to the LORD in the root of their lives because of the covenant and election (cf. v. 28: loved on account of the patriarchs).

Verse 17

The image of root and branches leads the apostle to state: unbelieving Jews are broken off the tree of the church of Israel, and Gentiles who come to faith in Christ are grafted as shoots onto that tree of the church among those Jews ("some") who also accept Christ. Note the meaning: the Old Testament church remains in the New Testament. The true church of Christ today is a continuation of the old Israelite church of Moses. The late Prof. Fabius said: the Reformed church is the church of Adam.

The objection has often been made that a gardener would never graft a "wild" shoot onto a "cultivated" trunk, but vice versa: the cultivated improves the wild. But there is plenty of evidence that what Paul says was indeed done in earlier times in Palestine and Greece to rejuvenate an old olive tree. Hence Dr. H.C.M. de Stigter, during the oral defence of his Ph.D. thesis on June 13, 1986 at the Landbouwhogeschool of Wageningen, defended the following proposition: "In his letter to the Romans Paul uses a somewhat surprising image: the grafting of *wild* olive shoots onto the cultivated olive. However, there are indications that he is referring to a method used in Greece to rejuvenate old olive trees."²

² *Ed. Note:* See also C. C. de Vries in the paper, *Tot Vrijheid Geroepen*; "... wild shoots were and are grafted onto a cultivated tree in order to rejuvenate an old tree. Branches which are grafted in

Verses 18ff.

As in v. 17, Paul here also warns the Christian Gentiles not to boast against the Jews, that is, "not to speak about them with contempt in a conceited manner" (D. Holwerda). For salvation is from the Jews (John 4:22)! Anti-Semitism is excluded!

Verse 22

This verse is not very clear. Therefore Dr. D. Holwerda proposed putting a period after "God's kindness to you," and then to continue: "If only you continue in his kindness! For otherwise you too will be cut off!"

"Kindness" is merciful grace conferred in God's covenant and church. (See Glossary #7.)

"Sternness." From a Greek word which means literally: to cut off; in our language: sternness, abruptness, severity.

Verse 23

Note the words: "if they [the Jews] do not persist in unbelief." Only by accepting Christ can a Jew enter again into the church of God and Christ.

Verses 25, 26a

"So that you may not be conceited:" that is, lest you follow your own thoughts and boast in your faith as Christian Gentiles in contrast to the disobedience of the Jews. The same thought occurs also in vv. 18-21.

"Mystery": the non-biblical (Greek) use of the word implies that something is and remains secret or hidden. Biblical usage is: it does not remain secret, but is revealed and made known by God. (See Glossary #23.)

Three things belong to the content of the mystery revealed here (including v. 26a):

- (a) a hardening has come upon part of Israel;
- (b) this hardening will last until the full number of Gentiles has come in to God's kingdom;
- (c) so "all Israel" will be saved.

In the history of the exegesis of this text, three main interpretations have emerged:

1. "All Israel" is the people of Israel, the Jewish nation as it will exist at the end of this dispensation; it will then be converted *en masse* after the mission to the Gentiles has ended.³
2. "All Israel" is the total of the elect from the Jews, which will believe during this new dispensation (from the ascension to the return of Christ).⁴

this manner then produce good fruit..." Prof. Lekkerkerker believes that because of all this, the matter becomes "only more confused", but it is most unlikely that Paul made an error!

³ *Ed. Note:* Adherents of this opinion include S. Greijdanus, D. Holwerda, H.J. Jager and W.H. Velema.

3. "All Israel" is the whole Christian church, all the elect from Israel and the Gentiles.⁵

Sometimes a combination of the above opinions is also found.⁶

Some adherents of opinion 1 add a form of millennialism (doctrine of the thousand year reign): when the full number of Gentiles is converted, the mass conversion of the Jews will occur in a 1000-year period (Revelation 20), possibly begun by a first return of Christ and a first resurrection of the righteous.

I adopt the second of the above opinions. It is not possible at this point to explain my reasons, but the following notes to vv. 25ff. give some of them.

"Mystery": this word in the New Testament hardly ever refers to what will happen in the final period or on the last day of this dispensation. (See Glossary #23.)

Further, what is said in vv. 25 and 26 is not all that new, for it has almost all been said before in vv. 11,12 and 24. Besides, the apostle does not refer to a revelation granted him, but to the Scriptures: Isaiah 59:20; 27:9; and Jeremiah 31:33ff. (vv. 26b and 27).

The meaning of "until" is not always clear in Greek, or in Hebrew. Besides "until" it can also mean: as long as, while, in the meantime. Psalm 110:1 may be used as an example. Some exegetes of this psalm say that the time after "until" is not to be considered. Others think that the situation referred to in the main clause (sitting at God's right hand) continues also after the enemies have been brought into submission. The first-mentioned meaning is found, for example, in Matthew 13:33, where "until" refers to the purpose, and while the leavening continues; so also 2 Peter 1:19, where the day continues after it dawns. "Until" ("till"), thus, often means "so that."

"The full number of the Gentiles" is the total number of the elect from the nations outside Israel; it is not all Gentiles individually.

We can now render verse 25b as follows: A hardening has come upon part of Israel, and this will continue as long as the elect Gentiles enter into God's kingdom.

This means, in my view, that this hardening of a part of the Jews will continue from Pentecost until the last day, while in the meantime all the elect from the Gentile nations will come to Christ. Hence, during the new dispensation, from the ascension to the return of Christ, the full number of Jews enters, as well as the full number of Gentiles – the full number of elect from both groups. "And so": in

⁴ Ed. Note: H. Bavinck, H.N. Ridderbos, and C. Vonk, among others, hold this opinion.

⁵ Ed. Note: John Calvin, F.W. Grosheide and others, share this view.

⁶ Ed. Note: For example, Karl Barth combines (2) and (3), *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, vol. 2, (1942), p.330: "all Israel" is God's people, from Jews and Gentiles, plus a mass of Jews converted at the end of this dispensation.

this manner. In which way? Answer: as it is written in the Scriptures (see vv. 26b and 27).

"All Israel": not all Jews individually, after Pentecost till the return of Christ, but the elect Jews, the "remnant" of Paul's time and the "remnant" after Paul's time till the last day.

In the old covenant the term, "all Israel," was often used. This does not mean each individual Israelite, one by one, but Israel as represented by, and in, its political, judicial and military leaders. "All Israel" is then the collective Israel as it meets in the assembly of the people and in its army, not the individual Israelites. And that is the way in which the apostle uses this expression, to point out all Israel as represented in its elected part. (Joh. Franke)⁷

Verses 26b, 27

These words of Paul occur in part in Isaiah 27:9; 59:20; and Jeremiah 31:33. The apostle shows how God saves the elect (in the way of repentance; see also 2 Corinthians 3:16).

Verses 28ff.

In vv. 28-31 the themes of vv. 11,12,24,25 and 26 return, with variations.

Paul uses two aspects of the Jewish people; enemies of the gospel (for your sake: which benefits you, Christian Gentiles, v. 11), but also with regard to election, beloved for the sake of the forefathers (vv. 24 and 25, and 26). The latter is explained in vv. 29ff.: God does not regret his call and his gifts to Israel (9:4). God continues to show mercy to "some" stiff-necked Jews in order to save all Israel (see above).

Verses 30-32

Jews and Gentiles have nothing with which to reproach each other: both have been disobedient, and both (all, v. 32) depend on God's mercy.

"Bound...over to": the image is that of criminals locked into a prison of disobedience. That does not mean that God is the author of the sin of disobedience, for the apostle means: God delivered them into the prison which they themselves had already entered (1:28).

Verses 33-36

In awed wonder and amazement, in deep thankfulness, the apostle comes to the doxology about God's wondrous ways and works. "From him and through him and to him" does not point to the three persons in the Godhead: from him, from the Father; through him, through the Son; and to him, to the Spirit. The work of the Spirit, for example is not indicated anywhere in the Scriptures with "to". No, it

⁷ Ed. Note: Quote is from *Israel's val en verlossing*, sennons on Romans 11:1-32 (1959), p.43.

means that everything is from and through and to the one God, namely in creation ("from"), in maintaining (upholding) ("through"), and in completion ("to"). Everything must honour and praise him without ceasing for his wondrous counsel and works in the church and in the world. Amen: it is true and certain.

B. Main Thoughts

1. Regarding the connection between chapters 9-11 the following can be said. Chapter 9 speaks about God's sovereign good pleasure to choose and to cast out, to show mercy and to harden. Chapter 10 shows that Israel itself is nevertheless to blame for its reprobation, because of its unbelief. Chapter 11 points out that Israel's unfaithfulness to the covenant does not nullify God's faithfulness to his promises and gifts. Just as a believing remnant was saved out of the whole of Israel under the old covenant, this continues in the new dispensation. And that remnant represents all Israel.
2. Three main questions can be asked concerning Israel, the Jews after Christ.
 - (a) Should we expect a massive Jewish conversion to Christ at the end of the age?
 - (b) Will a separate Jewish-Christian church be formed, yes or no?
 - (c) Will this (massively converted) Jewish nation receive Palestine as the Promised Land again?

The answer to the first question will largely answer the last two.

In Romans 11 Scripture answers the first question in vv. 25 and 26. For a complete answer also other scriptural passages may be important.

To repeat the first question: should we expect a massive Jewish conversion to Christ at the end of the age?

This does not mean a conversion of each individual Jew, but of the great majority.

Many Reformed authors answer this question affirmatively,⁸ but the question is answered in the negative by as many other Reformed authors.⁹

3. I agree with those who answer this question in the negative (see above under A. Notes to the Text). A summary of my reasons follows:
 - (a) Paul's starting point is in chapter 9, where it says that God's promises are not fulfilled in all Israelites individually, but only in a part of them (9:6ff.); in chapter 11 he calls that part "a remnant" (11:5).

⁸ *Ed. Note:* Among those Reformed are: G. Voetius, A. Kuyper, J. van Andel, G. Doekes, S. Greijdanus, J.A. Nederbragt, H.J. Jager, D. Holwerda, and W.H. Velema. As well, the Marginal notes in the *Statenvertaling* (1637) indicate that in the 16th and 17th centuries most Reformed authors expected such a conversion.

⁹ *Ed. Note:* Among those who answer this question in the negative are: J. Calvin, G. Ch. Aalders, H. Bavinck, H. Hoekstra, K. Dijk, C. Vonk, R. Schippers and H..N. Ridderbos.

- (b) The full inclusion of Israel, as of Gentiles, is not a mass national conversion, but the full number of the elect from Israel, the Jews.
 - (c) "And so" in 11:26 does not mean "afterwards," but either looks to what goes before (through the ages, till the end, a "remnant" is saved, which constitutes the full inclusion of Israel and represents "all Israel"), or to what follows (vv. 26b and 27: in the way of conversion to Christ), or to what goes before and what follows. It makes little difference to the meaning. I prefer the first view on linguistic grounds.
 - (d) The mystery (v. 25) is not a mass conversion of Israel, but means that Israel's unfaithfulness does not nullify God's faithfulness to his promises and gifts (v. 29), so that by God's grace and faithfulness a "remnant" is saved, and in that remnant "all Israel."
 - (e) Thus, "all Israel" is neither the Jewish nation after undergoing a mass-conversion at the end of the age, nor the church made up of converted Jews and converted Gentiles, but the "full number" of the Jews which comes to Christ from the Ascension to the return of Christ.
 - (f) For in v. 25 it says that a part of Israel has been hardened (not that this hardening is only partial), "until the full number of the Gentiles has come in," that is: a part of Israel will continue to be hardened, *as long as* the fullness of the Gentiles comes in, that is until the return of Christ.
4. The second question, whether a separate Jewish-Christian church will or will not be formed must be answered in the negative. When, in the time between the Ascension and the return of Christ, Jews convert to Christ, they will belong to the one Christian church (Belgic Confession, Articles 27-29). Only a millennialist view would answer this question in the affirmative.
5. The third question is: Will this (mass-converted) Jewish nation receive Palestine as the Promised Land again? This question is answered variously.
- (a) Some hold that only a Jewish nation converted to Christ has a right to Palestine as a national inheritance on the basis of God's promises, because in the Old Testament the promise of return to and possession of Canaan is conditional on conversion and faith in Christ. Prooftexts given are: Deuteronomy 30:1-10; 1 Kings 8:46-50; 2 Chronicles 30:8,9; Jeremiah 29:14,30 and 31; Ezekiel 11:18; 20:37; 36:33; 37:12-14; Hosea 11:10; Micah 4:7; 7:8-10; Zechariah 8:7,8. Most persons who have this opinion teach that the Old Testament promises refer to the return from exile under Zerubbabel, but also to a second return at the end of time (after a second, current, exile).
 - (b) Others think that, on the strength of God's promises, Palestine rightly belongs to Israel, even though it has not converted to Christ, as is the case today, since conversion may occur later.

- (c) A third group opines that the Old Testament promises of return to and possession of Palestine only refer to the return from the Babylonian exile: the prophecy declares explicitly that after the rejection of the Messiah there is no longer room for a nation of Israel in which the old "they my people and I their God" finds reality. There is one place in the prophecy in which it is clearly said that when God's judgment comes upon Israel for its rejection of the Messiah, this judgment, as distinct from earlier ones, will be irrevocable. Then the special relationship that God began with the nation of Israel at Sinai is broken forever; then there is no longer room for the nation of Israel as the chosen people of God (see Daniel 9:27). It may happen that Palestine is populated by Jews and that those Jews form a state of Israel, as is the case today, but it is a state like any other state.

I concur with this opinion, but it would be beyond the scope of this book to expand upon it. The second and third questions have been discussed only briefly, because usually the answer to the first question automatically answers the second and certainly the third!

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