



## “And then all Israel will be saved”

### *Paul's expectation*

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). These words have provoked numerous questions. In this article, I intend to map out the most significant exegetical issues surrounding this expression, attempting to provide a suitable answer. We will discover that Paul’s words offer a redemptive-historical as well as a missionary perspective. This article deals with Paul’s expectation. And here, the key question is: what exactly does the apostle mean by “all Israel”?

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 their 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.

The organization *Christians for Israel International* has as its aim to make Christians throughout the world aware of the significance of the Jewish people in God’s dealings with this world. 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*”. Doesn’t 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 as regards Israel.

And yet, on the day of Pentecost, it was *Jewish* people who were baptised in the name of Jesus the Messiah. They were the ones who gave heed to the exhortation to be saved from this corrupt generation (Acts 2:40-41). The Saviour 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. On this basis, I’d like to explore what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote that *all Israel will be saved*.<sup>1</sup>

### **1. About Israel, not to Israel**

Paul comes to the end of Romans 9-11, the well-known chapters dealing with the relationship between God and His covenant people. Here, the apostle is grappling with this question: how does the refusal of so many of his countrymen to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah of Israel relate to God’s faithfulness to the people of Abraham? Paul is speaking to certain brothers and sisters in the congregation of Rome. He does not want to leave them ignorant of a certain mystery. The believers he is speaking to are not themselves of Jewish descent. *I am talking to you Gentiles*, he says (Romans 11:13). Here, Paul is talking *about* Israel, not directly *to* Israel. In the verses 28-32 we find the sequence ‘*they – you – all men*’, and it is clear that those who are addressed as ‘you’ are of Gentile descent. In Paul’s words, the promise to Israel takes a remarkable detour – so to speak – for it is the *goyim* who are confronted with it. This remarkable detail has to do with the nature of the mystery he wants to share with the Christian congregation in Rome.

## **2. Paul's mystery**

Paul has a secret to share with his audience. A *mustèrion* is something that has been hidden, but which does not remain hidden; rather, it is revealed through God's dealings in history. The secret can be shared *now*, it does not point to the final phase of history.

Still, there is something unfathomable in it, for after all it is a *divine* mystery of salvation. It isn't as though Paul would have received some new revelation, or had uncovered some new insight from the Scriptures. The accent here is not on what Paul has received, but on what he wants to share with his audience in Rome, so that they may not be conceited (v. 21).

Paul has one particular secret in mind (*to mustèrion touto*): it relates to the mystery of salvation on which his apostolate among the nations is based. 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>2</sup> However, the work of God does not reach its conclusion with the Gentiles, does it? And that is why Paul warns his readers: do not become conceited. For in this mystery, Paul has discovered an extra dimension: what God is doing among the nations still means something for Israel.

### **3a. Hardening/blindness in part has come over Israel**

The notion of a partial hardening or blindness is already found in v. 7. There, Paul sets the elect of Israel over against 'the others', who were hardened. *What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the elect did. The others were hardened.* This too is part of the work of God, Paul shows in v. 25 (*gegonen*). What does 'in part' mean? This could be understood as 'partial' in a temporal sense, or as 'partial' in a quantitative sense.

In other places Paul never uses *apo merous* in a temporal sense, and the notion of a partial hardening fits well with v. 7, so in this case we ought to understand this to be a hardening of a part of Israel. By contrast, 'all Israel' is mentioned later. There is an exegetical consensus that in v. 25, *all Israel* refers to the people of Israel. After the olive tree metaphor in the previous paragraph, Paul returns to his main theme: how could there be such unbelief in Israel, of all people God's own chosen nation?

### **3b. Until the full number of the Gentiles has come in**

In v. 12, Paul spoke of the fullness (*plèrooma*) of Israel, but there is a full number of Gentiles also (compare Luke 21:24). Here, 'fullness' does not have an eschatological meaning, the full number of the elect, as is often claimed. The Dutch exegetical tradition especially has repeatedly pointed to the fact that in v. 12 the term 'fullness' stands in contrast to 'loss' (*hèttèma*). In other words, the fullness of Israel will be achieved when the lost ground has been made up. That is also the way it goes in the world of the nations.

As Paul writes this, he has the end of his apostolic mission in view. He can regard his mission as accomplished when all nations have heard the Gospel – and in the great city of Rome all nations are represented (Romans 15:19, 2 Timothy 4:17). It is especially in his letter to the Romans that Paul talks about his plans to go to Spain. For his intended journey to Spain will take him to the ends of the earth. At the western horizon, Paul sees the conversion of many Gentiles. For Paul, a missionary perspective unfolds here in its fullest extent. The verb 'come in' (*eiserchesthai*) has no object here. The coming in of the Gentiles is therefore not the same as being grafted into the olive tree of Israel. Most commentators refer here to the well-known expression from the Gospels: 'to enter the kingdom/eternal life', expressions which otherwise do not occur in the letters of Paul. However, the Book of Acts 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 ground lost to Israel, and in great numbers they enter the kingdom of God.

### **3c. And so all Israel will be saved**

At the heart of this exegetical discussion we find the Greek words *kai houtoos* (v. 26). It is debatable, however, whether the weight often attached to these words is really 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. There are three possible meanings to *kai houtoos*:

- 1) Temporal (*after that* all Israel will be saved),
- 2) Modal (*in this manner* all Israel will be saved) or
- 3) A logical connection (*in the same way*, all Israel will be saved).

Currently, the temporal interpretation is gaining favour. Rightly so, for the temporal meaning of *kai houtoos* has been shown to exist in post-classical Greek, and Paul uses it this way in other places.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that here, too, the apostle is thinking in terms of a progression in time, since ‘until’ (*achri hou*) also indicates the passage of time (compare also the ‘then-now’ scheme in vv. 30-31). The majority of church fathers also followed this line of interpretation, for they often paraphrased with ‘then’ or ‘after that’. The point is *that* all Israel will be saved, not *how* that will happen. The Dutch *Nieuwe Bijbelvertaling* (NBV) has therefore made a justified choice in v. 26 where it translates “*Dan zal heel Israël worden gered*” (then all Israel will be saved). Compare the rendering of the Revised English Bible (REB): “*once that has happened, the whole of Israel will be saved.*”

The expression ‘all Israel’ (*pas Israel*) occurs only once in the New Testament, but is found in the Septuagint as a translation of *kol Israel* (it is actually a Hebraism, for it ought really to be translated as *pas ho Israel*). What does this expression mean?

- The New Testament church, consisting of both Jews and Gentiles. However, in Romans 9-11 the name Israel is consistently used in the ethnic sense, that is, for the Jewish people. Within this group, a narrowing might be possible (see Romans 9:6: *Not all who are descended from Israel are Israel*); an extension to others outside the group is not.<sup>4</sup> And the significant use of the name ‘Jacob’ in the quotation that immediately follows can only be a reference to the twelve tribes of Israel.
- The faithful remnant of Israel, representing the entire people. This, however, would be a distinct anticlimax in the argument, which earlier speaks so hopefully about the full number and acceptance of Israel (ch 9:11, 15). Paul’s question revolves around the fate of a people that had hardened itself (ch 11:1). Does disobedient Israel still have a future? In Paul’s chain of thought, the chosen part of Israel (*eklogè*; ch 11:7) is simply Israel in a nutshell; it serves not as a representative, but in opposition to ‘the others’ who were hardened.
- Every single Israelite. However, *pas Israel* is not the same as *pantes hoi Israelitai*. In chapter 9:3, Paul says that he would be willing to be cut off from Christ, if need be: he is willing 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 stands at the heart of chapter 11. Not to be hardened in unbelief is an indispensable condition for being received again (ch 11:23).
- Israel as a whole. This may be compared with ‘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>5</sup> But then immediately following, 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. After his conversion, Paul still considered himself to be a Jew, of the tribe of Benjamin (Romans 11:1b;

Philippians 3:5). In the Revelation visions, we again encounter the twelve tribes of Israel: first as a Messianic army of 144,000 warriors from all the tribes of Israel (Revelation 7:1-9), then as the names inscribed on the gates of the new Jerusalem, the abode of all the tribes of Israel (Revelation 21:12). Hence, *all Israel* refers to the whole of Israel, its twelve tribes together.

#### **4. As it is written**

In support of his statement concerning the salvation of Israel in vv. 26 and 27, Paul refers to Scripture. First of all, to Isaiah 59:20. Virtually all commentaries identify the Deliverer from Zion as the Messiah, referring to 1 Thessalonians 1:10. Still, this appears to be too simple an explanation for something that is explicitly represented as something that 'is written' (*kathoos gegrapta*). First, the original context is that of JHWH, who comes to the aid of His people when there is no-one else to help. Threateningly, He advances on His enemies; as Deliverer, He comes to meet His people. Second, in all other quotes throughout these chapters, God is the subject. This is true also for the adjacent quotation, a combination of Jeremiah 31 and Isaiah 27: it is none other than JHWH Himself who forgives the sins of His people. Third, the whole passage builds up to a song of praise to the mercy of God (vv. 33-36).

Ridderbos, therefore, challenges the view that Paul relates 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>6</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 (Galatians 4:26). Time after time, Paul makes it clear that Jesus Christ will appear 'from heaven' (Philippians 3:20; 1 Thessalonians 1:10 and 4:16; 2 Thessalonians 1:7; see also Colossians 3:4).

In any case, in Romans 11 Paul wishes to highlight God's work of salvation for His people Israel. Zion stands at the centre of His work of salvation. That is also why there is so much variation within the textual tradition between the readings 'to Zion' (as in the Masoretic text: *letsioon*) 'because of Zion' (as in the Septuagint: *heneken Sioon*) and 'from Zion' (as Paul has it: *ek Sioon*). God has a heart for Israel. He is oriented to Israel; He is motivated by it; Israel remains His point of departure.

And we ought to keep in mind that in the Bible, the name Zion refers especially to the spiritual centre of Jerusalem. This is the place the Holy One chose as His dwelling. Zion forms the bridge between the earthly and the heavenly Jerusalem, the city without a temple, the place where the Holy One will live forever with mankind. What does the Deliverer do, when He turns His eye to Zion? Turn godlessness away, renew the covenant, take away sins. See here God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit.

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## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> The content of this article was presented at a symposium entitled “Hoe leest u ‘Israel’?” (How do you read ‘Israel’?) jointly organized by *Nederlands Dagblad* and the Centrum voor Israelstudies, held in Ede, the Netherlands, on 29th September 2008. The final and fully annotated version of this presentation was published in *Theologia Reformata*, December 2008. This presentation dealing with Romans 11 may be regarded as a continuation of my ‘Israel en de Kerk: het vervullingsmodel’ published in *De Reformatie*, vol 83 (2008), pp 357-359.

<sup>2</sup> See J.P. Versteeg, ‘Kerk en Israël volgens Romeinen 9-11’, *Theologia Reformata* 34 (1991), 151-169.

<sup>3</sup> D. Holwerda, ‘Heel Israël behouden’, in: *De Schrift opent een vergezicht*. Kampen: Voorhoeve, 1998, 160-193; P.W. van der Horst, “‘Pas dan zal heel Israël gered worden’”, *Kerk en Theologie* 51 (2000), 183-188. Van der Horst refers to 1 Corinthians 14:25 and 1 Thessalonians 4:17 (see also houthoos in Acts 20:11, immediately preceded by the temporal *achri augès!*). On this point, Romans 5:12 and 1 Corinthians 11:28 are less unequivocal.

<sup>4</sup> Some exegetes incorrectly regard Isaiah 42:25: “But in the LORD all the descendants of Israel will be found righteous and will exult” as prophesying an extension 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* (Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Alten Testament). Freiburg: Herder, 2008, 431.439-440.

<sup>5</sup> Sanhedrin 10:1-4, with a reference to Isaiah 60:21.

<sup>6</sup> H. Ridderbos, *Aan de Romeinen* (*Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament*, Tweede serie). Kampen: Kok, 1959, 265-266. (translation mine – Aart Plug)