

Defense of Romans 11

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I've wanted to write for a long time on Romans 11, the powerful chapter in the epistle that explains the Gospel about Israel's fall and return to the fold of Messiah. While I've always loved the chapter, and found it moving, I write specifically because of those who reinterpret this chapter from its plain meaning, and claim it does NOT teach that all Israel will come to Messiah and be saved. The unique line – **and so all Israel will be saved** – they claim speaks only of “spiritual Israel” and not all Jews, and not national Israel.

I was recently listening to Gary Demar make his case against that Romans 11 speaks of all Jews coming to Christ in the future, and I want to specifically address a couple of arguments he makes. First let me say I admire Mr. Demar's work, and his teaching on prophecy has almost convinced me of preterism. That's not because he is a smooth talker or very clever with words, but because he goes to Holy Scripture over and over and lets Scripture speak. He is a very good teacher. As of present my own belief falls under the umbrella of historical premillennialism, and of a dual fulfillment of prophesy; that the prophesies regarding the last days were fulfilled locally two thousand years ago, and will be fulfilled in a greater sense in the future. The kingdom of God came in 2,000 years ago, and will reach its completion when Christ returns to rule. I am nevertheless open-minded about other views, and believe brother Gary Demar and others make a good case for preterism.

However, I find his interpretation of Romans 11 to be demonstrably false, and think that those who interpret the chapter this way are conveniently leaving out much of what it says because it doesn't fit with their other doctrines. I also think that brother Gary and others think they almost NEED to deny that all Israel will be saved – despite it being a clear teaching – because they see it is a major doctrine of premillennialists and of dispensationalists especially. Seeing they want to attack premil and dispensational doctrine, they see this as a key place to attack. However, an acceptance of the plain teaching that all Israel will return to the Savior does not demand an acceptance of either of those views. It does not demand that we believe Israel will be returned in a national sense in God's plan of salvation, or that the Temple must be rebuilt. Nor does it demand that Israel and the Church are two separate salvation peoples who cannot exist side by side. The plain reading of Romans 11 ONLY demands we believe that Israel will return as a whole – that is the bulk of Jewish people on earth. This understanding can harmonize with any major millennial view, including amil and postmil, although the details of how it works out may vary. Romans 11 is NOT a premil or dispensational chapter. It is a chapter which only affirms that physical Israel, who are presently in blindness, will in the future come to the light of Christ. They will do so as a whole group.

I am going to address two main arguments that Mr. Demar and other ministers make against the plain reading of all Israel being saved. The first is the claim that since Paul explains in verse 1 he speaks of God not casting his people away through the remnant of Jewish believers -- through men like him who have come to believe in Christ -- he could not be speaking of physical or national Israel. Clearly, the Israel which is not cast away is only that seed of believing Jews now, and perhaps various portions who come in over time in the future. The second argument is that the conclusion of this passage -- that all Israel will be saved -- likewise speaks only of spiritual Israel, either all spiritual Jews or all the Church, which is like a spiritual Israel anyway. It does NOT speak of the bulk of Jewish people, physical Israel, or national Israel.

Coming to conclusions like this, or making arguments like this, really involves downplaying some very clear passages in this chapter which lie BETWEEN the opening of the chapter and the final point Paul makes. You see, he indeed speaks of Israel's continuing existence through the remnant at the beginning, but he ALSO speaks of Israel as a whole shortly after that, and makes it clear that those who have been cast away -- physical Israel -- will at a future time come in and be saved. There is no reasonable way to leap over this portion straight to the end, and claim that only all spiritual Israel will be saved. It amounts to using the several opening verses alone to fix the meaning of the teaching at the end. Rather, we need to look at everything which came in between, and these passages make it obvious that physical Israel is in view explicitly and will return to the sheep fold.

Let me go through this main section of the chapter from start to finish, and I think you'll see what I see in the text. I don't mean to convince you myself, but just point out what the text actually says. Paul opens the chapter with the key question for us: **"I say then, has God cast away His people?"** Then, he answers his own question in a way that those who spiritualize Israel claim proves their point. He says: **"Certainly not! For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin."** So Israel will indeed continue, and he points out it is presently continuing through men like himself -- those Jews who came and believed on Messiah. Israel continues through these TRUE and spiritual Jews. We can have no objection here, but remember, this is not all that Paul will say.

Paul then expounds briefly on the point about believing Jews being a continuation of Israel. He goes to the Scriptures on Elijah, and compares this group of believers in Messiah to Elijah and his fellow prophets at the time of Ahab who continued the faith. He even gives us the term "remnant" here, which connects to past times in which a small portion of faithful Israel were the reason Israel as a whole continued. Note also that Paul uses the term "at this present time" when describing the remnant of Jewish believers like himself who accept Messiah. He is speaking of the remnant he and others can see around them. He is not necessarily saying this is all of Israel that will continue in the future. He is making a point regarding how we can know that God has not cast away the Jewish people through the remnant which accepted the promised Messiah.

Now if these introductory verses were the only ones in the passage before the end, and if the text immediately jumped to verse 26, saying all Israel will be saved, there's be a strong point to be made that "all Israel" refers either to the remnant, or to the Church as a spiritual Israel. However, let's look at what Paul teaches after the introduction, starting in verse 7. First, he uses Scripture to point out that God has darkened the eyes of Israel, but for the elect remnant, beginning:

*"God has given them a spirit of stupor,
Eyes that they should not see
And ears that they should not hear,
To this very day."*

(vs 8)

No one would disagree we are talking about the Jewish people as a whole here, not the remnant. No one would doubt he is discussing the darkening of physical Israel. Verse 11 pretty much locks us into a discussion of national Israel, NOT the remnant, as coming back to Messiah in the future. It says:

"I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation *has come* to the Gentiles."

Who has stumbled? Well, it was not the remnant. The remnant believed. The ones who stumbled is physical or national Israel. So then this question refers to all Israel. So has ALL ISRAEL stumbled that they should fall? What answer does Paul give us? He says: **"Certainly not!"** Therefore, it's clear that the unbelief of national Israel is not a complete and permanent stumble, and even that it was not for the purpose that they should ultimately fall. Rather, Paul goes on to explain the purpose of their stumbling, teaching that it was to bring salvation to the Gentiles, to the nations of the world who had long been outside of the chosen people. How wonderful is God's purpose for Israel's stumbling, brethren. It is a part of God's plan to save the world.

The apostle goes on in verse 12 to give us a little more: **Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness!** What an amazing and wondrous statement. We are still talking of physical Israel, since we speak of their fall. Obviously, it was not the remnant who fell. The remnant believed. It was national Israel who fell so just as in the past verse, we have the whole nation in our view. Paul relates that if through their unbelief salvation came to the world, imagine how much more will come through their "fullness." In other words, if even their failure blesses the world, imagine the incredible blessing for the world when they succeed and come to the Lord Yeshua. The word "fullness" or *pleroma* in Greek refers to being complete or being full, or the thing which is filling or is made full. The completeness of Israel comes in the future, not in the present when we see the remnant. It will also be riches for the world, and in a greater way than we presently know. I don't honestly know how anyone can read verses 11 and 12 of this passage and NOT believe that Israel will return to Messiah. Paul is clearly not speaking of a remnant or of the Church as a spiritual Israel, but

rather about the whole of the Jewish people. In doing so he speaks of their fall as a temporary thing that God has made for the purpose of salvation.

Paul goes on to make what is nearly a parallel statement to the previous comparison between Israel's failure and its fullness. After expressing his desire as a Jew, and also an apostle to the Gentiles to save even just some of his brethren, Paul writes: **For if their being cast away is the reconciling of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?** (vs 15) Here, being cast away in the past, and accepted in the future, continues the previous thoughts about present and future situations. No one would argue that Paul writes this about the remnant of Israel. He is clearly speaking of physical Israel, and reminds of the incredible value of their future acceptance by God. If countless Gentiles were saved by their present fall, think of the eternal life that will be brought about when they receive their Savior. What is difficult to see about that?

To mention a point that's not central to the passage, or to my argument here, I'd like to point out that this verse in particular seems to parallel what we are told about Yeshua's death and resurrection. We are reconciled to God through His death (2 Corinthians 5:19), and brought to eternal life through His resurrection (1 Peter 1:3), and here we see that the nations are reconciled to God through Israel's stumbling over Christ, and many will receive eternal life through their rising from the dead. Many Christians will not like that observation, but I believe there is a real connection, seeing as Israel is a type of Christ in Scripture, and the Savior of the world is from the womb of Israel, a brother to the people who rejected Him. The passion of Messiah and the darkening of Israel certainly bear a resemblance.

While speaking here of fallen Israel being restored, Paul makes a statement which brings together the logic of both speaking of the remnant at the present and also speaking of the Jewish people coming back in the future. He says, following spiritual patterns of the Hebrew Scriptures, **"For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy; and if the root is holy, so are the branches."** (vs. 16) The firstfruit that he speaks of is Messiah and following Him the remnant of Jews who believed. The root can be seen as the covenant history or the saints through the previous ages. If that remnant, and that foundation are holy, then all the people will be sanctified too. We don't see it all now, but this is a scriptural truth that will be fulfilled. The remnant of Israel is holy. Therefore, we know that all Israel will be holy. This logic makes little sense if we interpret Romans 11 in a way that denies all Israel will be saved.

Now I understand where in this verse there could be some confusion, since Paul goes on to speak briefly in terms of the Church as a whole. He warns the Gentiles not to be lifted up with pride, since they have received the promises and Israel has not. If God has broken off branches from the tree (meaning the Jews), and then grafted in wild branches (meaning Gentiles), then God can break off the Gentiles if He so desires as well. Moreover, if the Gentiles as the wild branches can be grafted in, then obviously so too can be the Jews, as the native branches whom He previously

broke off. In fact Paul specifically says **“if they do not continue in unbelief, [they] will be grafted in.”** (vs. 23)

A picture like this olive tree shows how the chosen people of God has grown through the New Covenant beyond the Jewish people or nation. It is an olive tree which now includes native and wild branches, with Jewish and Gentile bodies. Even when “all Israel” comes back to God, the chosen people will not be Israel uniquely, but will be the olive tree, the Assembly of God’s people, including Jew and Gentile. However, this mixture of people in the Church should not confuse us about the plain statements made of all Israel coming in, since it only makes known Israel is not the ONLY people to be saved. The natural branches being brought back in again refers to the bulk of the Jewish people then, not a mere trickling in of future remnants. The context makes this clear.

Paul then gives a teaching which confirms he speaks of physical Israel coming in, and not merely a remnant, or a small group here and there. Leading up to his final prophetic statement about the salvation of all Israel, he writes:

For I do not desire, brethren, that you should be ignorant of this mystery, lest you should be wise in your own opinion, that blindness in part has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. (vs. 25)

Here he reaffirms that the blindness on Israel, the blindness of unbelief is only “until” a certain point in time. When something lasts until a point in time, that thing is temporary, brethren. Israel’s blindness, I must repeat, is temporary. The word “until” in this sentence is the common Greek word *achri*, meaning until a certain time or as far as a certain place. There can be no confusion about this. Moreover, we have no reason to believe Paul only speaks of a small remnant or the Church. The remnant isn’t blinded, brethren, and he says “Israel,” not using the word remnant at all. There will be unbelief among physical Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles comes in. Here is that word fullness, or *pleroma* again. In this context most understand it to mean the full measure of what the Church can be according to God’s purpose for it, or the full number of saved Gentiles that God has ordained. When this point is reached, what is going to happen, brethren? Israel will no longer be blind. They will no longer be stumbling. They will no longer be darkened. That is what Paul has been speaking of for much of this chapter; the condition of physical Israel.

This leads us up to his conclusion. It begins, **“and so,”** meaning it is connected logically to the prior statement. The thought which is logically connected is this: **“all Israel will be saved.”** Those who interpret this to only mean spiritual Jews or to mean the Church can only do so by ignoring most of the preceding verses. They also have to ignore the immediately preceding verse, which speaks of Israel being blinded in a temporary way. They have to jump much earlier in this passage to where Paul speaks of the remnant, and suddenly demand this statement refer back to that. If you allow the whole of the passage to speak, including what immediately precedes it

verse-wise and logically, it speaks of the whole of national Israel. Just ask yourself this: is verse 25 speaking of the remnant or the whole of Israel? Who was blinded? Who stumbled? Verse 25 is clearly speaking of Israel as a whole, so this following verse also refers to Israel as a whole. To jump without reason back to the remnant is to read the text oddly, and avoid its natural flow. Verse 7 to verse 25 has spoken much about fallen physical Israel, often exclusively. That means verse 26 also speaks of fallen Israel and its salvation in the future.

If we wanted we could stop here with the verse on our debated line of text, but it is worth going up to the end to examine a few more statements which lock us into a plain reading of that line. After culminating in declaring Israel's future salvation, Paul backs this up with a passage from the Scriptures which prophesies Israel's repentance and restoration:

**“The Deliverer will come out of Zion,
And He will turn away ungodliness from Jacob;**

**For this is My covenant with them,
When I take away their sins.”**

(Isaiah 59:20-21)

No one would doubt that at the time of Isaiah the hearers understood those words to speak of national Israel. It may be true that certain things from the Old Testament are spiritualized, but remember, the apostle himself uses this passage in the context of speaking of fallen Israel being restored. He cites it as a means of explaining that. So it is right to see a literal meaning of those words referring to the future restoration of the children of Israel. There may be a spiritual way in which this occurred in the past through the remnant and through the Gentiles coming in, but it also has a literal fulfillment. Considering how it is being used here, it is a prophecy of what Paul sees in the future, not just in the past.

After briefly supporting this doctrine from the prophets, Paul goes on to reaffirm what he taught earlier about Israel not being cast out from God's plan, but being accepted in the future. He writes that Israel is still “beloved” by God because of the fathers (meaning the patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), despite being against the Gospel. (vs. 28) Would anyone claim he means spiritual Israel is still beloved? No, that makes no sense. National, or physical Israel is still beloved, even though they are an enemy of the Gospel. In the same context, speaking of the blinded and darkened Israel he sees at present, Paul subsequently writes: **For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.** (vs. 29) That means God will not remove all Israel from His original calling for them forever. He still loves that people He lifted up out of a poor and oppressed state, took through the wilderness, cleaned up, and brought into the land, and He will never stop loving them as a people. Their present condition does not change that.

Then he makes another comparison between the Gentiles and Jews:

For as you were once disobedient to God, yet have now obtained mercy through their disobedience,

even so these also have now been disobedient, that through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy.

For God has committed them all to disobedience, that He might have mercy on all.

(vs. 31-32)

It is a complex thought, but the apostle is pointing out that just as the Gentiles were saved through Israel's disobedience, now Israel can be saved through the Gentiles who now witness to the Messiah who had been sent first to the Jews. They are locked in a relationship of saving each other. God may have committed Israel to disobedience, but for the purpose He might have mercy on them all in the future, as well as on the Gentiles. How then can we say Israel will be forever disobedient? We clearly cannot.

Paul then exalts the wonders and mysteries of God at these revealed truths. He praises the Almighty for His wisdom, and mercy, and lordship. This truth about Israel's salvation, and its intertwining with the Gentiles' salvation, fills him with wonder, just as we look up at the night sky with wonder. He sees brilliance almost incomprehensible in this divine plan. He ends:

“For of Him and through Him and to Him *are* all things, to whom *be* glory forever. Amen.”

(vs. 36)

It should be granted, there is a way in which the truth about the Jewish people being saved and spiritual Israel being saved come together. That is because when all Israel are saved, all Israel will be spiritual Israel also, and they will have their place within the whole Church, which is likened to Israel through the New Covenant. No one denies there is a reality of a spiritual Israel within the whole body of believers, or that the Church right now functions apart from most Jews as the chosen people of God. Those truths and language pertaining to it are throughout the New Testament. However, that reality does not limit other realities. It does not limit that God will save physical Israel and bring them in also. Israel continues now through the remnant, just as Paul spoke of at the beginning of the chapter, and Israel will in the future be restored as a whole people. Those truths are not contradictory to each other. The firstfruit is holy, so also will be the lump. If we read this chapter naturally, there is no way to deny that the Jewish people as a whole will be saved.

To review, remember that this important passage in Scripture tells us these points about the fallen Israel:

1. They have NOT stumbled that they should fall
2. Their fall brought riches to the world, their fullness will bring even greater riches
3. Their being cast away by God brought reconciliation, so their acceptance will bring life from the dead
4. They, the Jewish people, will be grafted in if they do not continue in unbelief
5. The blindness upon Israel is UNTIL a certain future time, the fullness of the Gentiles.
6. All Israel will be saved
7. Israel is beloved by God despite being an enemy of the Gospel
8. Israel's calling is irrevocable
9. God will have mercy on all

At no time does Paul say he only speaks of a remnant here, and at no time does he say he only speaks of various remnants that may trickle in over time. He speaks of Israel, calls the object of his teaching Israel, and it is in this context that he speaks of the group being restored to God. The verse immediately before Paul teaches that all Israel will be saved is itself still speaking of the physical Israel which fell.

If we read this long passage normally, we cannot be confused about the meaning, nor thrown off by the introduction which mentions the believing remnant of faith. It is a process of thought, and takes us from the small remnant like Paul in his own day, to the discussion of physical Israel's blindness and future acceptance by God. It includes a picture of the entire olive tree, of Israel and the Nations together. Go ahead and read it again start to finish, and follow the logic. The point is not only that spiritual Jews will be saved, and sort of represent Israel as a whole. It is not that the whole Church will be saved (and of course both statements are true) but that the whole Jewish people will come to trust in Yeshua and be saved together.

While it's only my purpose to look specifically at the text of Romans 11, we can also see how its reality is expressed in our picture of the New Jerusalem, found in Revelation 21. When John sees the New Jerusalem descend out of heaven from God, its magnificent structure is a form which includes both the representatives of national Israel and of the Church. John writes,

“she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them, which are *the names* of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel:

three gates on the east, three gates on the north, three gates on the south, and three gates on the west.

Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

(vs. 12-14)

This is the Bride of Messiah. This is the fullness of the elect of God shown to John by the perfect wisdom of God. It is a composite unity, just as the Trinity is, and just as marriage is.

We also see a picture of Israel's acceptance by God in the brothers of Joseph. The brothers, although they sold Joseph into slavery, are restored and forgiven. Joseph may toy with them for a while, and even throw them into prison, but he finally reveals himself to them – taking away their blindness – and does not seek vengeance against those who hated and hurt him. They are fully restored. (Genesis 45:4-8, 50:19-21) Unless you think this image is totally unrelated to Messiah, then just as Joseph forgave his brethren, so will Yeshua forgive the whole of the Jewish people in a time to come. It is hard to imagine a future then without both the whole of Israel and Gentile peoples in the same body. The Church indeed has a Jewish past. It also has a Jewish future.

God be with you. Amen.