

All Israel: The Elect Remnant of Romans 11

**An Examination of Romans 11 Demonstrating That “All Israel” Refers to the Elect Remnant in the Apostolic Age,
Not to a Future National Restoration of the Jews**

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1. Introduction

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.” (Romans 11:25–27)

Among modern Reformed and Evangelical interpreters, these verses are generally believed to predict a national conversion of the Jews before the end of history. According to this view, the present hardening of ethnic Israel against the gospel, described by Paul in Romans 9 through 11, is temporary. After the fullness of the Gentiles has been completed—understood by proponents of this interpretation as the conversion of all the elect from among the Gentile nations—God will remove Israel's blindness and bring about a widespread conversion of the Jews so that they will come to faith in Jesus Christ before His return. This future restoration is widely regarded as the fulfillment of God's covenanted promises to Israel, the climax of Paul's argument in Romans 11, and the principal answer to the question he is addressing concerning God's faithfulness to His ancient people. Romans 11 is therefore understood to teach that, despite their present unbelief, the Lord still has a distinct future purpose for the Jews.

This article argues instead that Romans 11 explains how God was fulfilling His promises in Paul's own day rather than predicting events still awaiting fulfillment in a chronologically distant era. But before summarizing the interpretation defended in this article, it is worth considering why the question is important.

1.1 Why This Matters

Before committing to a thorough study of the question, many readers may wonder why the interpretation of a single chapter of the Bible deserves such careful attention. They may ask: Does it matter whether Romans 11 does or does not predict a national conversion of the Jewish people? Does this question have significant practical implications rather than being merely an exercise in speculative theology? Will adopting the right or wrong interpretation make any meaningful difference to a Christian's life or to the teachings and practice of the Church? The answer to all these questions is yes.

Although its advocates also appeal to numerous Old Testament prophecies and other biblical passages (which also will be addressed in this article), the futurist interpretation of Romans 11 has long served as the primary support for the doctrine that ethnic Israel will experience a large-scale conversion to Christianity at a time far beyond the apostolic age and still future to our own. If that interpretation of Romans 11 is false, as this article will demonstrate, then the doctrine itself cannot be sustained.

Like all erroneous doctrines, this one has harmful consequences. It has contributed to a distorted understanding of the place of the Jews in the purpose of God by assigning to ethnic Jewry a unique and favored position in God's plan of redemption; it has served to perpetuate an unbiblical division between Jew and Gentile; and it has diverted attention from the apostolic response to Jewish unbelief: the proclamation of the gospel and the call to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. These, in turn, have led to further and more destructive consequences, even influencing international political affairs and warfare between nations. These broader implications will be examined in detail later in this article.

Once the premise of a distinct program of Jewish salvation is accepted, it inevitably reshapes other aspects of Christian doctrine and practice. Thus, this article is of necessity not only a detailed examination of Romans 11, but also an investigation into the wider biblical framework governing the chapter and an explanation of the detrimental theological and practical consequences of departing from it.

However, it is important to recognize that the consequences of an interpretation, whether actual or perceived, cannot be allowed to determine the meaning of Romans 11. If the Bible truly teaches a future national conversion of the Jews, then that doctrine must be received regardless of its implications. We dare not reject the teaching of Holy Scripture or distort its meaning simply because we dislike some of its practical outworkings. The biblical text must be allowed to speak for itself, and its meaning must be determined by exegesis rather than by the consequences we wish to avoid or embrace.

1.2 A Summary of the Interpretation Defended in This Article

The fundamental contention of this article is that Romans 11 does not predict a large-scale conversion of the Jews. Rather, in chapters 9 through 11, Paul is explaining how God's promises to Israel were being fulfilled in his own day.

He describes his present sorrow over Israel's unbelief (Romans 9:1–3), the contemporary calling of Jews and Gentiles (Romans 9:24–26), the existence of a remnant “at this present time” (Romans 11:5), the ongoing hardening of many Israelites (Romans 11:7, 25), and the salvation that had already come to the Gentiles through Israel's fall (Romans 11:11). The argument unfolds consistently within the circumstances of the apostolic age.

The remnant principle also lies at the heart of Paul's argument throughout Romans 9–11. His explanation of Jewish unbelief rests not upon a future conversion of the nation as a whole, but upon the distinction between the elect remnant and the unbelieving majority. From the declaration that “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Romans 9:6), to the repetition of Isaiah's prophecy that “a remnant shall be saved” (Romans 9:27), to the affirmation that “at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace” (Romans 11:5), Paul repeatedly grounds his

argument in God's salvation of the elect within Israel rather than the entire nation indiscriminately.

The interpretation defended in this article is that Paul's argument describes a single process of redemption unfolding in the apostolic age: God ordained Israel's partial hardening so that the Jews' rejection of the gospel would lead to the gospel's proclamation among the Gentiles, and through the salvation of the Gentiles He would bring His elect remnant from among Israel to faith in Christ. Far from signaling the failure of God's promises, as many have supposed, Israel's unbelief became one of the principal means by which He accomplished them. "All Israel shall be saved" is understood to refer to the elect remnant of Israel whom Paul has been defining throughout Romans 9–11.

The article not only defends the interpretation summarized above, but also examines the exegetical claims upon which the future restoration interpretation depends. It contends that the futurist view derives not from Paul's argument itself but from a series of interpretive assumptions imported into Romans 11. Those assumptions have become so deeply embedded in modern Reformed and Evangelical thought that they have come to be treated as settled conclusions rather than propositions requiring proof. If they cannot be established from Paul's own argument—as the following chapters will demonstrate—then one of the most influential doctrines in modern prophetic interpretation rests upon a far weaker foundation than its adherents claim.

1.3 What This Article Does Not Argue

This article does not argue that Jews can no longer be converted to Christ. Like all others, the Jewish people continue to be proper subjects of gospel preaching, and the Triune God remains free to grant saving faith to individuals or to many according to His sovereign pleasure. The question under consideration is not what God may do in His providence, but what He has promised to do in Scripture.

Nor is this article intended to defend or refute any particular view of the millennium (the thousand-year reign of the Lord Jesus Christ described in Revelation 20), whether premillennial, postmillennial, or amillennial. Agreement with the interpretation of Romans 11 advocated here does not require the acceptance or rejection of any of those positions, nor does this article address the broader question of the future progress of the gospel among the nations.

The purpose of this article is simply to determine whether Romans 9–11, with particular attention to chapter 11, applies to ethnic Jews in a far-off epoch or whether Paul's words are best understood as explaining how God was fulfilling His promises in the apostolic age.

Although the argument begins with the immediate context of Romans 9–11, it also considers the broader testimony of Scripture, especially the Old Testament prophecies commonly cited in support of a future national restoration of the Jews and the way those prophecies are applied by the New Testament writers.

1.4 Is This a New Interpretation?

A large number of highly respected Reformed theologians have interpreted Romans 11 as predicting a large-scale conversion of the Jews. Writers such as Thomas Goodwin, Robert Haldane, Charles Hodge, John Murray, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones, together with many others, have held this position. Indeed, it has been the majority view among Protestants for the last few centuries and remains so today.

But while acknowledging that the futurist view of Romans 11 has been embraced by many, it must also be noted that the interpretation argued in this article—that Paul describes the salvation of the elect remnant within Israel during the gospel age—also has clear historical precedent.

English Presbyterian commentator Matthew Henry (1662–1714) explicitly recognizes that interpreters have long been divided between two different understandings of the timing of Romans 11's fulfillment:

“But the question is concerning the accomplishment of all this. [1.] Some think it is done already, when before, and in, and after, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, multitudes of the Jews were convinced of their infidelity, and turned Christians... [2.] Others think that it is yet to have its accomplishment towards the end of the world...”¹

This same point was acknowledged by American Presbyterian commentator Charles Hodge (1797–1878) when speaking of Romans 11:25:

“Although the interpretations given of this and the following verses are very numerous, they are all modifications of one or the other of the two following general views of the passage.

Many understand the apostle as not predicting any remarkable future conversion of the Jewish nation, but merely declaring that the hardening or blinding of the nation, was not such as to prevent many Jews entering the Christian church, as long as the Gentiles continued to come in. Thus all the true Israel, embracing Jews as well as Gentiles, should ultimately be saved.

The second general view supposes the apostle, on the contrary, to predict a great and general conversion of the Jewish people, which should take place when the fulness of the Gentiles had been brought in, and that then, and not till then, those prophecies should be fully accomplished which speak of the salvation of Israel.

The former of these views was presented, in different forms, by the great body of the authors who lived about the time of the Reformation...”²

The testimony of Henry and Hodge shows that the non-futurist interpretation is not a modern innovation but has long been recognized within Protestant interpretation.

Further evidence showing that this interpretation of Romans 11 has been advocated by Christian commentators far back into the history of the church will be presented later in this article after the exegetical argument has been examined in detail.

With these considerations in view, we turn first to the larger context of Paul's argument which is contained in the entirety of Romans 9–11.

2. Examining The Greater Context of Romans Chapters 9-11

2.1 The Unity of Romans 9–11

The discussion in Romans 11 cannot be separated from the larger argument of Romans 9–11, which forms a unified whole. Paul is not introducing a new topic in chapter 11 but continuing an extended explanation of how God's promises to Israel relate to the present reality of widespread Jewish unbelief and the rapid expansion of the gospel among the Gentiles.

At the beginning of his exposition of Romans 9, Scottish Reformed expositor Robert Haldane (1764–1842) recognizes that Paul's discussion extends throughout Romans 9–11:

“It was necessary to vindicate the faithfulness of God, and to prove that the rejection of the Jews was by no means opposed to the absolute security of God's elect, on which he had been so largely expatiating. This subject is therefore discussed in the three following chapters.”³

Paul's discussion in Romans 9–11 was prompted by questions that naturally arose due to what was happening in the early church, as Norwegian Lutheran theologian Ole Hallesby (1879–1961) explains:

“For the Gentile Christians in the early church it appeared as if the chosen people in its totality were rejected by God. And this inevitably called forth many questions. To these the Apostle answers in Romans 9 to 11 by showing that that which now has happened to Israel is exactly in harmony with God's promise and with his previous treatment of this people.”⁴

Hallesby's observation directs attention to the actual issue before Paul. The nation to which the promises had been given had, for the most part, rejected its Messiah, while large numbers of Gentiles were embracing the gospel. This gave rise to an obvious question: if God had chosen Israel and given them the covenants and promises, how could it now be that the Gentiles were entering the kingdom while the great majority of Jews remained outside it? Paul's task was to show this state of affairs could be reconciled with God's election of Israel and the promises He had made to them.

As Welsh Reformed minister Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) summarized the objection: “The Gentiles are in and the Jews are out.” If this were so, then, “Where is the purpose of God? Where is the immutability of God’s counsel?”⁵

Paul answers this objection at the outset by establishing a fundamental distinction within Israel itself: “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Romans 9:6). With this statement, the apostle distinguishes between Israel according to the flesh and the true Israel, consisting of those whom God has chosen according to His electing purpose.

Protestant Reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) explains Paul's distinction in Romans 9:6–8 as follows:

“For if Isaac, and not Ishmael, was the seed, though the one as well as the other was Abraham's son, it must be that all natural sons are not to be regarded as the seed, but that the promise is specially fulfilled only in some, and that it does not belong commonly and equally to all. He calls those the children of the flesh, who have nothing superior to a natural descent; as they are the children of the promise, who are peculiarly selected by the Lord.”⁶

Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Ridderbos (1909–2007) emphasized that Romans 9:6 governs the interpretation of everything that follows in Romans 9–11:

“The national conception of 'all Israel'... is in conflict with what Paul has just demonstrated in Romans 9, namely, that not all are Israel who are descended from Israel. Paul thus challenges just such a national conception of Israel as God's elect people. His entire argument is directed toward demonstrating that the true Israel is hidden in the national Israel as the kernel in the shell, that one may not identify the one with the other.”⁷

After verse 9:6, Paul immediately demonstrates the same principle from Israel's own history. Not all the descendants of Abraham were counted as children of the promise, for “In Isaac shall thy seed be called” (Romans 9:7). He then shows that the same distinction appears in the case of Jacob and Esau, where God’s electing purpose operates independently of natural descent (Romans 9:10–13). Being a child of God has never been grounded merely in physical lineage, but in the Lord’s sovereign calling.

Paul next appeals to Hosea and Isaiah to demonstrate both the calling of the Gentiles into the people of God and the preservation of a remnant within Israel itself (Romans 9:24–29). The chapter concludes by contrasting believing Gentiles with unbelieving Israel: Gentiles attained righteousness by faith, while Israel, pursuing righteousness through the law, did not attain it (Romans 9:30–32).

Romans 10 continues the same theme. Although Israel possessed the law and zeal for God, many within the nation remained outside the righteousness of God because they sought it through works rather than through faith in Christ (Romans 10:1–4). The gospel promise, however, is universal in scope: “whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed” (Romans 10:11). Paul concludes that “there is no difference between the

Jew and the Greek: for the same Lord over all is rich unto all that call upon him” (Romans 10:12).

Romans 11 does not depart from this argument but continues it. The chapter addresses how Israel’s hardening and the salvation of the Gentiles demonstrate the faithfulness of the Lord’s covenanted promises. Paul’s discussion of the remnant and the olive tree must therefore be understood in light of the argument he has already developed in Romans 9 and 10, because both serve to explain how “all Israel shall be saved.”

This understanding of the unity of Romans 9–11 is well summarized by Dutch Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof (1873–1957):

“In the chapters 9–11 the apostle discusses the question, how the promises of God to Israel can be reconciled with the rejection of the greater part of Israel. He points out first of all in the chapters 9 and 10 that the promise applies, not to Israel according to the flesh, but to the spiritual Israel; and in the second place that God still has His elect among Israel, that there is among them still a remnant according to the election of grace, 11:1–10. And even the hardening of the greater part of Israel is not God's final end, but rather a means in His hand to bring salvation to the Gentiles, in order that these, in turn, by enjoying the blessings of salvation, may provoke Israel to jealousy.”⁸

2.2 The Present-Time Framework of Romans 9–11

The continuity of Paul's argument is evident throughout Romans 9–11 in his repeated references to circumstances in his own day. The following survey illustrates the extent to which the apostle's discussion is rooted in contemporary realities rather than in events of a distant future age.

Table 1: Present-Time References in Romans 9, 10, and 11

Reference	Text	Significance
Romans 9:1–2	“I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.”	Describes Paul's present grief over the widespread unbelief of his fellow Jews.
Romans 9:6	“Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect.”	Paul asserts that the preaching of the gospel is presently working conversions.
Romans 9:24	“Even us, whom he hath called...”	Refers to those already being called and saved in Paul's own day.
Romans 9:30–32	“The Gentiles... have attained... / Israel... hath not attained...”	Contrasts Gentile faith and Jewish unbelief as present realities.
Romans 10:1–3	“My heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel...”	Describes Paul's present concern for Israel and its current spiritual condition.
Romans 10:16	“They have not all obeyed the gospel.”	States that many Jews were currently rejecting the gospel.

Romans 11:1–2	“Hath God cast away his people?... I also am an Israelite...”	Paul points to himself as present evidence that God has not rejected Israel.
Romans 11:5	“At this present time also there is a remnant...”	Explicitly identifies a remnant existing in Paul's own day.
Romans 11:7	“The election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded.”	Contrasts the presently believing remnant with the presently hardened majority.
Romans 11:11	“Through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles...”	States in the present tense that “salvation is come unto the Gentiles.”
Romans 11:20	“They were broken off, and thou standest by faith.”	Contrasts Jewish unbelief with Gentile faith as presently occurring realities.
Romans 11:30–31	“Ye now have obtained mercy... these also now not believed...”	Refers to Gentiles who have “now” obtained mercy. Describes Jews who have “now” not believed.

Understanding the unity of Romans 9–11 and the present-time character of its argument is essential for interpreting Romans 11 correctly. The chapter is not a departure from the themes developed in Romans 9 and 10, but the continuation of the same argument concerning God's faithfulness to His promises despite the widespread unbelief of Israel.

The burden of proof therefore rests upon those who would argue that Paul suddenly abandons this present framework and begins describing events thousands of years removed from the circumstances he has been discussing throughout Romans 9–11. Nothing in the flow of Paul's argument suggests such a transition.

Romans 11 is not a prophecy of what God will do in a distant future, but an explanation of what He was doing in Paul's own day.

3. Old Testament Prophecies and the Question of Interpretation

3.1 The Misuse of Old Testament Prophecy to Support the Future Restoration Belief

Before proceeding further, a fundamental distinction must be recognized: *possibility is not proof*. The question is not what a text might be made to mean, but what it most naturally means in its immediate context and in light of the larger teaching of the entire Bible. This distinction is especially important in the present discussion because the case for a national conversion of Israel is often built upon the cumulative force of numerous prophetic passages interpreted in a particular way.

Defenders of the futurist interpretation frequently appeal not only to Romans 11 itself but to a large number of Old Testament prophecies. Passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Zechariah, and other prophets are often grouped together and

interpreted as pointing to a time in which Israel as a nation returns to God and is restored to a position of special prominence in the latter days.

A clear example of this method may be seen in the following statement from Scottish Covenanter theologian John Brown (1610–1679) commenting on Romans 11:26, where he gathers numerous prophetic passages in support of his conclusion:

“When God shall again gather the remnant of his flock out of all countries (Jeremiah 23:3) and begin to rejoice over her with joy, and rest in his love (Zephaniah 3:17), then shall the Jews become one church; even all the tribes shall unite together, and make up one national church (Jeremiah 50:4–5), and a church it shall be, that shall flourish in the ordinances, and other church privileges (Jeremiah 31:31, 38) and shall enjoy much of God's favour, and many testimonies of his love (Jeremiah 31:28, 33:9, etc., 32:41, etc., & 46:27, Zephaniah 3:17, Ezekiel 34:25, etc.) and shall be a humble, mourning, holy people unto the Lord (Jeremiah 50:4–5), having received pardon at the Lord's hand (Isaiah 33:24, Jeremiah 31:24, Ezekiel 36:26, etc.). Thus they shall be a glorious and pure church, having pure ordinances, and God signally among them (Zechariah 8:23, Micah 4:1–2). Thus all Israel shall be saved. See further, Zechariah 10:6, etc., & Ezekiel 28:25–26, 36:8, etc., and 39:25, etc.”⁹

Brown's argument illustrates a common feature of the futurist method: numerous Old Testament prophecies are gathered together and treated as converging upon a single future national restoration of Israel. But do those prophecies actually require such an interpretation?

Many of these prophecies have long been interpreted by respected commentators as referring first to Israel's return from the Babylonian captivity and then to their greater fulfillment in Christ and the gathering of His people under the new covenant.

As Matthew Henry observes:

“...the prophecies of the Old Testament, which have an immediate reference to the affairs of the Jews and the revolutions of their state, under the figure of them do certainly look further, to the gospel church and the kingdom of the Messiah, and are so expounded in the New Testament; and, as to many of them, the application is made by Christ himself and his apostles.”¹⁰

This article asserts that the twofold pattern of interpretation described by Henry—an initial historical fulfillment followed by a greater fulfillment in the gospel age—fully accounts for the principal passages often appealed to in support of the futurist interpretation of Romans 11, leaving no exegetical necessity for positing a further prophetic fulfillment in a large-scale conversion of the Jewish people.

The following comments on three major Old Testament passages frequently cited in discussions concerning the future of Israel illustrate this pattern of interpretation. Again and again, these commentators interpret the promises not as predictions of a

restoration of ethnic Israel, but as prophecies finding their fulfillment in Christ and His gathering of the Church through the gospel. While many acknowledge an initial historical realization in Israel's return from exile, they consistently regard that restoration as preliminary to a greater fulfillment in the Messianic kingdom. Rather than postponing these promises to a subsequent age, they understand them as already fulfilled, or as being fulfilled, through the redeeming work of the Savior.

Jeremiah 30–33

Matthew Poole recognized that Jeremiah's restoration prophecies have an initial fulfillment in the return from Babylon and their ultimate fulfillment in Christ:

“This verse is a promise of the building again of the city, the temple, and the chief governor's house, all which was fulfilled by Ezra, Nehemiah, and Zorobabel.... Whatsoever the Jews and some others say, the Branch of righteousness here spoken of can be meant of no other but Christ, who is called a Branch out of the stem of Jesse.”¹¹

John Trapp also understood Jeremiah's restoration prophecies to have an initial fulfillment in the return from Babylon while ultimately finding their fulfillment in Christ:

“...it was fulfilled according to the letter in carnal Israel sent back by Cyrus (upon Daniel's prayer, who understood by that book here mentioned that the time of deliverance, yea, the set time was come, Dan. 9:2), but more fully in those "Jews inwardly," Ro 2:29 those "Israelites indeed" who are set at liberty by Christ, Joh 8:36 and shall be much more at the last day.”¹²

Summing up the same principle, Trapp adds:

“All this was prolusio perfectae liberationis in Christo, a type and pledge of perfect deliverance by Christ.”¹³

The Pulpit Commentary identifies the fulfillment of the promise with spiritual Israel and the Church of Christ:

“What is here promised to the Jews finds its fulfilment, not in the Jews alone, nor in them at all until they submit to the Christian influences of the new covenant, but in all the spiritual Israel—in the Church of Christ.”¹⁴

Matthew Henry interprets the promised return from captivity as a historical restoration that foreshadowed a greater fulfillment in the New Testament era:

“The prophet does indeed, by direction from God, change his voice. Most of what he had said hitherto was by way of reproof and threatening; but these two chapters are wholly taken up with precious promises of a return out of captivity, and that typical of the glorious things reserved for the church in the days of the Messiah.”¹⁵

Joseph Sutcliffe likewise understood the return from Babylon to prepare the way for the greater fulfillment of Jeremiah's restoration promises in Christ and His Church:

“Jerusalem and her temple shall be rebuilt, to prepare the way for the true and living temple. Here is double comfort, felicity in Jerusalem, and the plenitude of hope in Messiah their king. The glory of Zion was to be lost in the glory of the church.”¹⁶

Isaiah 24-27

John Calvin sees the return from captivity as a preliminary fulfillment pointing ultimately to Christ and the gospel:

“This was indeed accomplished under Darius, but the Prophet undoubtedly intended to extend this prophecy farther; for that restoration was a kind of dark foreshadowing of the deliverance which they obtained through Christ, at whose coming the sound of the spiritual trumpet, that is, of the gospel, was heard, not only in Assyria or Egypt, but in the most distant parts of the world.”¹⁷

Albert Barnes treats Isaiah 24–27 as a single prophetic unit whose historical backdrop is the Babylonian captivity but which ultimately points to the reign of Christ. Here he summarizes the teaching of chapters 25 and 26:

“The twenty-fifth describes the deliverance from that oppressive bondage, and the re-establishment of the true religion on Mount Zion, with a rapid glance at the ultimate prevalence of religion under the Messiah; the twenty-sixth chapter is a song expressive of joy at this signal deliverance—in language, in the main, so general that it is as applicable to the redemption under the Messiah as to the deliverance from Babylon.”¹⁸

Charles Ellicott likewise understood Isaiah 24–27 as a unified prophecy whose fulfillment extends beyond the prophet's own day to the era of Christ:

“The chapters from 24 to 27, inclusive, are to be taken as a continuous prophecy of the overthrow of the great world-powers which were arrayed against Jehovah and His people. Of these Assyria was then the most prominent within the horizon of the prophet's view; but Moab appears in Isa. 25:10, and the language, with that exception, seems deliberately generalised, as if to paint the general discomfiture in every age (and, above all, in the great age of the future Deliverer) of the enemies of Jehovah and His people.”¹⁹

John Trapp identifies the great trumpet of Isaiah's prophecy with the proclamation of the gospel:

“The great trumpet shall be blown... This great trumpet is the gospel, the preaching whereof is of power to save those that perish, to put life into the dead.”²⁰

The Geneva Bible notes identify Isaiah's feast on Mount Zion with the Church gathered under Christ from both Jews and Gentiles:

*"That is, in Zion, by which he means his Church, which would under Christ be assembled of the Jews and the Gentiles, and is here described under the figure of a costly banquet, as in Mt 22:2."*²¹

The Geneva notes likewise interpret the promised restoration as finding its chief fulfillment in Christ:

*"In the time of Cyrus, by whom they would be delivered: but this was chiefly accomplished under Christ."*²²

Amos 7-9

Matthew Henry understands the historical restoration of Israel as subordinate to the prophecy's principal fulfillment in Christ, the gospel church, and the calling of the Gentiles:

*"By Jesus Christ these tabernacles were raised and rebuilt. In him God's covenant with David had its accomplishment. ... In him also God's covenant with Israel had its accomplishment, and in the gospel-church the tabernacle of God was set up among men again, and raised up out of the ruins of the Jewish state. This is quoted in the first council at Jerusalem as referring to the calling in of the Gentiles and God's taking out of them a people for his name."*²³

Matthew Poole explicitly distinguished between the historical return from exile and the ultimate fulfillment of Amos' prophecy in the Messiah's kingdom:

*"This promise I nothing doubt hath a double aspect, both to the return out of captivity, and to the Messiah's kingdom, and each part is to be considered by us: if we would duly explain this and the following verse, let us look first to the letter and historical reference, and next to the mystical and spiritual sense of the words."*²⁴

Albert Barnes viewed the return from Babylon as only an initial fulfillment of Amos' prophecy, with its ultimate realization in Christ and the spiritual blessings of the gospel:

*"The two tribes received some little shadow of fulfillment of these promises on the return from Babylon. The non-fulfillment of the rest, as well as the evident symbolic character of part of it, must have shown them that such fulfillment was the beginning, not the end.... They were but the vestibule to the spiritual. As shadows, they ceased when the Sun arose. As means, they ended, when the end, whereto they served, came."*²⁵

Keil and Delitzsch likewise interpret Amos' restoration prophecy as fulfilled in the Messianic kingdom:

“The kingdom of David could only be raised up again through an offshoot from David's family. And that this can be no other than the Messiah, was unanimously acknowledged by the earlier Jews.... Even of these nations, only those are taken by Israel, i.e. incorporated into the restored kingdom of David, the Messianic kingdom, upon whom the name of Jehovah is called.”²⁶

The Geneva Bible footnotes interpret Amos' restoration promises as fulfilled in Christ and His Church:

“I will send the promised Messiah, and restore by him the spiritual Israel.... the very enemies (as were the Edomites) and others would be united with the Jews in one society and body, of which Christ would be the head.... The accomplishment of this is under Christ, when they are planted in this Church, out of which they can never be pulled, after they have once been grafted into it.”²⁷

The commentators repeatedly interpret these restoration prophecies as having a twofold fulfillment: first in Israel's return from exile, and ultimately in Christ's establishment of His kingdom through the gospel. Those cited above are not intended to provide an exhaustive survey, but to illustrate a much broader stream of Protestant interpretation. The writings of many other theologians on numerous Old Testament restoration prophecies could likewise be cited in support of the same understanding.

It may be objected that some of the commentators cited above also expected a future conversion of the Jews. That is true, but it misses the point. The issue is whether they regarded the Old Testament restoration prophecies as remaining deficient apart from the twofold pattern described above. Their own words indicate that they did not. Rather, they understood the initial fulfillment in Israel's return from the Babylonian captivity and the greater fulfillment in Christ to constitute the complete realization of those prophecies. Once that complete realization in Christ has been recognized, there remains no exegetical necessity for positing a further fulfillment in a large-scale conversion of the Jewish people. This article therefore asserts that such an additional fulfillment is an arbitrary construct imposed upon the prophetic texts rather than a conclusion that naturally arises from them.

If proponents of the futurist position contend that a further fulfillment of the restoration prophecies is required, or that other Old Testament prophecies cannot be satisfactorily explained apart from a future large-scale conversion of the Jews, the burden rests upon them to demonstrate those claims from the biblical text itself.

It should be noted that not all futurist interpreters have applied these prophecies consistently. While many have understood the Old Testament restoration prophecies as predicting a mass conversion of the Jews to Christianity and nothing further, others have seen them as including the restoration of the Jews to their ancestral homeland. Among those who have held this view are John Owen, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Jonathan Edwards, J. C. Ryle, and Charles H. Spurgeon.

Owen, for example, writes:

“...the generality of the Jews, all the world over, shall be called and effectually brought to the knowledge of the Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ; with which mercy they shall also receive deliverance from their captivity, restoration to their own land, with a blessed, flourishing, and happy condition therein.”²⁸

It seems that the view which includes both the future conversion of the Jews and their restoration to the land is more internally consistent than one which retains only the promise of conversion while rejecting the accompanying promises concerning the land. The prophecies themselves repeatedly unite spiritual renewal with the return to the land, the rebuilding of cities, the cultivation of vineyards and fields, the reunification of the nation, and the secure possession of the inheritance promised to the fathers. Throughout the Bible, nations are ordinarily understood in terms of what has sometimes been summarized as blood and soil—a people united by common ancestry and identified with a particular homeland. If, then, the prophets are speaking of the restoration of Israel as a nation, it is difficult to justify retaining the promises concerning the restoration of the people while treating those concerning the land as inapplicable.

The interpretation defended in this article, however, rejects both alternatives. It contends that the Old Testament restoration prophecies do not predict a national restoration of Israel that is future to our time, whether understood as the conversion of the Jews alone or as the restoration of both the Jewish people and their homeland. Those prophecies find their fulfillment first in the return from exile and then in the Lord Jesus Christ, who gathers the one people of God under the new covenant.

But ultimately the determining factor is not how theologians have interpreted the prophecies but how Christ and His apostles applied them. If they are to be used in support of a future conversion of the Jews, it must be shown that the New Testament writers themselves interpret at least some of them in that way.

3.2 The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone

How, then, do Christ and His apostles interpret the prophecies? Again and again, they interpret Old Testament prophecies concerning Israel's renewal as finding their fulfillment, not in a renewal of national Israel, but in the work of redemption already taking place through the Savior in their own day. That work included the salvation of the Jewish remnant foretold by the prophets, together with the gathering of the Gentiles into the same covenant people.

A clear example appears in Acts 15:15–17, where James cites the prophecy of Amos 9:11–12 concerning the rebuilding of the fallen “tabernacle of David.” Rather than postponing this restoration to a future national event, James declares that it is being

fulfilled through the Lord's present work of gathering a people for His name from among the nations.

The same pattern appears elsewhere. Isaiah 49:6 speaks of the restoration of Israel while also making the Servant “a light to the Gentiles,” and Paul and Barnabas apply this passage directly to their own Gentile mission (Acts 13:47).

Hosea's promise that those who were “not my people” would become God's people (Hosea 2:23; 1:10), though originally addressed to Israel, is applied by Paul to the present calling of God's people from both Jews and Gentiles (Romans 9:24–26)

Joel's prophecy concerning the outpouring of the Spirit (Joel 2:28–32) is declared by Peter to be fulfilled in the events of Pentecost (Acts 2:16–21), marking the inauguration of the new covenant age through the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah's prophecy that those who had not heard of the Servant would come to know Him (Isaiah 52:15), set within his larger prophecies concerning the restoration of Zion, is applied by Paul to his own ministry of preaching Christ among the Gentiles (Romans 15:20–21).

Ezekiel's promise that the Lord would dwell among His restored people and be their God (Ezekiel 37:26–28) is likewise applied by Paul to the present Church, whom he identifies as “the temple of the living God” (2 Corinthians 6:16).

Similarly, Jeremiah's promise of the new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (Jeremiah 31:31–34) is cited at length by the writer to the Hebrews as fulfilled in the new covenant established through Christ, under which believers now live (Hebrews 8:6–13; 10:14–18).

When the apostles interpret the Old Testament prophecies about Israel's restoration, they identify their fulfillment with the saving work inaugurated through the Lord Jesus: the salvation of the Jewish remnant and the gathering of the Gentiles into the same covenant people. They do not postpone that fulfillment to a restoration of ethnic Israel in a distant era.

Any interpretation of Romans 11 which derives support from the Old Testament restoration prophecies must either interpret those prophecies consistently with the apostolic understanding of them or demonstrate from Scripture why a departure is justified.

3.3 Paul's Application of Old Testament Prophecy in Romans 9–11

Romans 11 is often treated primarily as a prophecy of future events. Yet one of the most striking features of its larger context is that it repeatedly presents Old Testament Scripture as finding fulfillment in the apostolic age itself. Throughout Romans 9–11, Paul cites numerous passages from the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms and applies them to circumstances existing in his own day. Far from being a vehicle for prophecies

about the future, the passage is one of the clearest examples in the New Testament of an apostle interpreting the events and conditions of his own time as the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture.

The following table illustrates the extent of this pattern.

Table 2: Old Testament Passages Applied to Present Realities in Romans 9, 10, and 11

Reference	Old Testament Source	Paul's Application
Romans 9:25–26	Hosea 2:23; 1:10 “I will call them my people...”	Applied to the present calling of Gentiles into the people of God.
Romans 9:27	Isaiah 10:22: “A remnant shall be saved.”	Applied to the contemporary remnant within Israel.
Romans 9:29	Isaiah 1:9 “Except the Lord... had left us a seed...”	Applied to God's present preservation of a remnant.
Romans 9:33	Isaiah 8:14; 28:16 “Whosoever believeth on him...”	Applied to Israel's present stumbling over Christ and the salvation of believers.
Romans 10:6–8	Deuteronomy 30:12–14 “The word is nigh thee...”	Applied to the gospel presently being preached.
Romans 10:11	Isaiah 28:16 “Whosoever believeth on him...”	Applied to all who presently believe in Christ.
Romans 10:13	Joel 2:32 “Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord...”	Applied to the present gospel offer extended to all.
Romans 10:15	Isaiah 52:7 “How beautiful are the feet...”	Applied to the contemporary proclamation of the gospel.
Romans 10:16	Isaiah 53:1 “Lord, who hath believed our report?”	Applied to Israel's present rejection of the gospel.
Romans 10:18	Psalms 19:4 “Their sound went into all the earth...”	Applied to the gospel already having been proclaimed.
Romans 10:19	Deuteronomy 32:21 “I will provoke you to jealousy...”	Applied to the contemporary calling of the Gentiles.
Romans 10:20	Isaiah 65:1 “I was found of them that sought me not...”	Applied to the present salvation of the Gentiles.
Romans 10:21	Isaiah 65:2 “All day long I have stretched forth my hands...”	Applied to Israel's ongoing unbelief.
Romans 11:2–4	1 Kings 19:18 “I have reserved to myself seven thousand men...”	Applied to the remnant existing in Paul's own day.
Romans 11:8	Isaiah 29:10; Deuteronomy 29:4 “God hath given them the spirit of slumber...”	Applied to the present hardening of unbelieving Israel.

Romans 11:9–10	Psalm 69:22–23 “Let their table be made a snare...”	Applied to Israel's contemporary judicial blindness.
Romans 11:26–27	Isaiah 59:20–21; 27:9 “The Deliverer shall come out of Sion...”	Applied to the salvation accomplished through Christ.

Paul does not quote the Old Testament only as background material or as a source of general theological principles. Throughout Romans 9–11, he repeatedly presents prophetic passages as finding their fulfillment in the present circumstances he is describing.

This pattern does not by itself settle every question raised by Romans 11, but it establishes an important interpretive principle: Paul consistently treats Old Testament prophecy as finding fulfillment in the realities then unfolding before him. Accordingly, the fulfillment of the Old Testament restoration promises is centered in Christ and the new covenant.

This understanding is by no means peculiar to the interpretation defended in this article. The conviction that the Old Testament reaches its fulfillment in Christ has long been a fundamental principle of Protestant interpretation and has been affirmed by many theologians who nevertheless differed over the interpretation of Romans 11. The question is not whether those promises are fulfilled in Christ, but whether the fulfillment identified by Christ and His apostles is complete or requires a further historical fulfillment.

But a hermeneutic which defers the fulfillment of the Old Testament restoration promises to a dramatic eschatological event focused on the Jews necessarily diminishes the significance attached to the fulfillment that Jesus and His apostles declare has already taken place.

Paul now turns to the principle that governs his argument in Romans 11: the preservation of the elect remnant within Israel.

4. The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant

An important element of Paul's argument in Romans 11 is the long-established biblical pattern that within Israel the saving purpose of God is realized not in the nation indiscriminately, but in a remnant preserved by grace. As already noted in the Introduction, this theme is woven throughout Romans 9–11. Paul repeatedly distinguishes between Israel according to the flesh and the true heirs of the promise, between the elect and the hardened, and between the remnant that obtains salvation and the majority that remains in unbelief. This is not an incidental feature of biblical history, but a recurring principle. Again and again, the visible covenant people appear as a mixed body: many belong to Israel outwardly, but only a portion truly stand in saving favor with God. Paul's statement that “at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace” (Romans 11:5) introduces no novelty. It

identifies the present situation as the continuation of a pattern already deeply embedded in the history of Israel.

Table 3: References to the Remnant Principle in Romans 9, 10, and 11

Reference	Text	Significance
Romans 9:6	“For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel.”	Distinguishes the true Israel within ethnic Israel.
Romans 9:8	“But the children of the promise are counted for the seed.”	Defines the heirs of the promises as a chosen subset within Israel.
Romans 9:23–24	“Not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.”	Focuses on the called and elect within the ethnic groups rather than their entirety.
Romans 9:27	“A remnant shall be saved.”	Explicitly states that only a remnant of Israel will be saved.
Romans 9:29	“Except the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed...”	The continued existence of God's people depends upon a preserved remnant.
Romans 10:16	“But they have not all obeyed the gospel.”	Distinguishes believing from unbelieving Israelites.
Romans 11:1	“Hath God cast away his people?... I also am an Israelite...”	Paul himself serves as evidence that God has not rejected all of fleshly Israel.
Romans 11:2–4	“I have reserved to myself seven thousand men...”	Paul appeals to the preserved remnant in Elijah's day as the pattern for his own day.
Romans 11:5	“At this present time also there is a remnant...”	Explicitly identifies a contemporary remnant.
Romans 11:7	“But the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded.”	Divides Israel into the elect remnant and the hardened majority.
Romans 11:14	“Might save some of them.”	Paul speaks of the salvation of some Jews rather than the nation indiscriminately.
Romans 11:17	“If some of the branches be broken off...”	Only some of the natural branches (Jews) are removed, implying that others remain.

This pattern of remnant salvation appears clearly within Israel's earliest history. The generation brought out of Egypt experienced extraordinary covenant privileges, yet the great majority fell under judgment in the wilderness and did not enter the promised land. As Paul later says, “with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness” (1 Corinthians 10:5). Of the generation that first left Egypt, Joshua and Caleb were the only adult men to enter the land (Numbers 14:30). Thus even in the formative period of Israel's national life, the promises were not realized in the whole generation as such, but in a faithful minority preserved within it.

In Elijah's day, when apostasy seemed to have swallowed the nation, the Lord declared, “Yet I have left me seven thousand in Israel, all the knees which have not bowed unto Baal” (1 Kings 19:18). Paul appeals directly to this episode in Romans 11:2–4, thereby

identifying the situation of his own day with that earlier pattern: widespread defection does not mean that God has cast off His people, for He still preserves His elect within the nation.

Isaiah speaks in the same terms. “Though thy people Israel be as the sand of the sea, yet a remnant of them shall return” (Isaiah 10:22), a text Paul cites in Romans 9:27. Earlier, the prophet declares that unless the Lord had left “unto us a very small remnant,” Israel would have become “as Sodom” and “like unto Gomorrah” (Isaiah 1:9). The point is not merely that some survive national judgment, but that the continued existence of the people of God depends upon that remnant whom the Lord preserves for Himself.

Calvin makes the same point in his commentary on Isaiah:

*“Through his tender mercies a remnant shall be saved. And why? That the Church may not utterly perish; for it is through the favor which he bears towards it that the Lord, though our obstinacy lays him under the necessity of trying the severest judgments, still reserves some small seed.”*²⁹

The Babylonian exile likewise illustrates the same pattern. Judgment fell upon the nation, and the restoration that followed was not the return of every scattered Israelite, but the return of a portion. The post-exilic community was itself a remnant community. Once again, the people of God continued, not through the uninterrupted faithfulness or fullness of the nation as such, but through a divinely preserved remainder brought through judgment.

This same structure continues into the New Testament. John writes of Christ, “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him...” (John 1:11–12). The division is internal to Israel itself: the Messiah is rejected by the many and received by a smaller company. At the beginning of Acts, the gathered disciples number only “about an hundred and twenty” (Acts 1:15), yet this small body constitutes the faithful nucleus of the new covenant community. As the gospel advances, thousands of Jews are brought to faith (Acts 2:41; 4:4; 21:20), but these conversions still occur within a nation marked by widespread unbelief. The apostolic age does not abolish the remnant pattern; it confirms it.

Hallesby summarizes the same principle:

*“The promises in all ages have referred to the spiritual Israel, not to the Israel of the flesh. Therefore God has repeatedly punished the rebellious people by hardening their hearts and has succeeded in saving only a small remnant which nevertheless constituted at all times the true Israel, the true people of God.”*³⁰

Reformed commentator William Hendriksen (1900–1982) likewise comments on Romans 11:5:

“It does not surprise us therefore that also 'at the present time,' that is, in the apostle's own day, there was a saved remnant, and that Paul belonged to it. In Romans the remnant doctrine is either taught or implied also in the following passages: 9:6 f.; 9:18a; 10:4, 11, 16; 11:14, 24, 25.”³¹

Hendriksen continues:

“Further substantiation of the doctrine that salvation is for the elect remnant can be found in such Old Testament passages as Isa. 1:9 (= Rom. 9:29); 11:11, 16; 46:3; 53:1; Jer. 23:3; 31:7; Joel 2:32; Amos 5:15; Mic. 2:12; 4:5-7; 7:18; Zeph. 3:13, to mention but a few. Was not a son of Isaiah named Shear-Jashub, meaning A remnant shall return?”³²

Paul does not present this principle as something new, but explicitly applies it to the apostolic age. When he says, “even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace,” the force of “even so then” is crucial. He is not contrasting the present with the past, as though a new principle had now emerged. He is drawing an analogy: as in Elijah’s day, so also now. The Israel of Paul’s own time is to be understood by the same definition as the Israel of earlier Scripture. God’s saving purpose is present and active, but it is realized in the remnant, not in the nation indiscriminately.

If throughout Israel's history God's promises were realized through a remnant preserved within a larger unbelieving body, and this is demonstrated by Paul in Romans 9 and 10, why should chapter 11 suddenly be read as introducing the opposite principle?

The elect obtain the promise; the rest are hardened. That distinction is not exceptional; it is the recurring pattern of the Bible. The burden of proof therefore rests upon anyone who interprets “all Israel shall be saved” in a way that departs from this scriptural pattern.

5. The Olive Tree and the One People of God

The same principle is further clarified by Paul’s olive tree imagery in Romans 11:16–24. The figure is deliberately simple yet theologically precise: there is one root and one tree. The people of God are not divided into separate bodies, but constitute a single covenant community whose identity remains continuous across history.

Within this one tree, however, there is a real distinction among the branches. Some of the natural branches—representing Israelites—are broken off because of unbelief, while wild branches—representing Gentiles—are grafted in by faith. The point of the metaphor is not merely to describe inclusion and exclusion, but to define the principle by which participation in the people of God is determined. It is not lineage, but faith. “Because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith” (Romans 11:20).

This structure directly reinforces the argument already established in the preceding verses of Romans 9–11. The distinction between outward Israel and the elect within Israel (Romans 9:6) is here expressed in historical terms. Membership in the covenant people is neither static nor guaranteed by descent; it is contingent upon faith, and those who do not believe are removed, even if they are natural branches.

At the same time, the imagery excludes the idea that the Lord has formed a separate people alongside Israel. The Gentiles are not planted into a different tree, but are grafted “among them,” sharing in “the root and fatness of the olive tree” (Romans 11:17). The covenant community remains one. What changes is not the identity of the tree, but which branches are presently attached to it.

Throughout the apostolic writings, Jews and Gentiles are brought together into one body. In Ephesians 2:14 we are told that Christ Jesus “hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition.” Membership in the people of God is no longer determined by ethnic descent but by union with Christ. The olive tree imagery of Romans 11 is fully consistent with this broader apostolic teaching.

Charles Hodge explicitly identifies the olive tree with the one covenant people of God throughout history:

*“The church of God is the same in all ages and under all dispensations. It is the society of the true people of God, together with their children.... In every stage of its progress, the church is the same. The olive-tree is one, though the branches are numerous, and sometimes changed, vs. 17–24.”*³³

Paul's teaching leaves no room for interpretations that assign a continuing distinction between Jew and Gentile, as does the futurist view of Romans 11. According to the apostle, Christ “hath made both one,” “hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us,” and has created “in himself of twain one new man,” reconciling “both unto God in one body by the cross” (Ephesians 2:14–16).

If Paul's olive tree contains only one people of God standing on one principle of inclusion, where in the metaphor is there room for a destiny belonging uniquely to ethnic Israel?

The reception of the Gentiles into the people of God is intended to provoke Israel to jealousy (Romans 11:11, 14). Seeing the blessings of the covenant enjoyed by Gentiles, some Jews are stirred to consider the gospel and are brought to faith. Paul describes this aim in explicitly limited terms: “if by any means I may... save some of them” (Romans 11:14).

The grafting in of natural branches is governed by the same principle. “And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in” (Romans 11:23). There is no alternative path for Israel and no unconditional promise of national restoration. The only way back into the tree is through faith. The condition that applies to Gentiles—“thou standest by faith” (Romans 11:20)—applies equally to Jews.

When read in this light, the imagery prepares the way for Paul's later statement that "all Israel shall be saved" (Romans 11:26). The olive tree does not introduce a new prophetic horizon but illustrates the very process of salvation Paul has been describing throughout Romans 9–11. Jews are broken off because of unbelief and grafted in again through faith; Gentiles likewise stand only by faith. Nothing in the illustration suggests that Paul has shifted from this present reality to a prophecy concerning a large-scale national conversion of the Jews at some remote point in the future.

Thus, the salvation of Israel unfolds not through the renewal of the nation as a nation, but through the continued ingathering of elect Jews, together with the Gentiles, into the one covenant people of God.

6. The Language of Romans 11 Examined in Sequence

With this framework in view, the argument of Romans 11 may now be followed in sequence. The following exposition is concerned specifically with those portions of the chapter commonly cited in support of a future national conversion of the Jewish people and is not intended as a complete treatment of every subject addressed in Romans 11. The question before us is whether the language commonly cited by supporters of the futurist interpretation actually requires the conclusions they reach when examined in its immediate context. It will be shown that Romans 11 does not introduce a new stage in God's dealings with Israel, but unfolds the same pattern already established in the preceding chapters.

6.1 Israel Not Rejected: The Present Remnant (Romans 11:1–10)

Paul opens Romans 11 with the controlling question that governs the entire chapter: "Hath God cast away his people?" (Romans 11:1). The question arises naturally from the widespread unbelief of the Jewish nation in the apostolic age. Israel had received the covenants and the promises, yet the great majority had rejected the object of them, the Lord Jesus Christ. Had God's covenant to Israel therefore failed? Had He cast away His people?

Paul answers immediately and emphatically: "God forbid." The widespread unbelief of Israel does not mean that the Lord has rejected His people or that His promises have come to nothing. Paul's purpose is to explain how God remains faithful to His promise despite the unbelief of most of Israel.

The apostle first appeals to himself as evidence: "For I also am an Israelite, of the seed of Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin." Paul's own conversion demonstrates that God has not utterly rejected Israel. If even one Israelite has been graciously brought to faith in Christ, then the proposition that God has cast away His people cannot be true. The existence of believing Jews is itself evidence that God's covenant has not failed.

Paul next appeals to the experience of Elijah (Romans 11:2–4). In Elijah's day the nation appeared almost wholly apostate. The prophet lamented, “they have killed thy prophets, and digged down thine altars; and I am left alone.” It seemed as though the covenant people had disappeared.

The Lord's answer revealed otherwise: “I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal.” The covenant had not failed because God had sovereignly preserved a faithful remnant within the nation. Though the visible condition of Israel suggested universal apostasy, God had quietly accomplished His saving purpose through those whom He had reserved for Himself.

As Calvin wrote:

*“He expressly calls them a remnant that survived through the grace of God: and thus he bore witness that God's election is unchangeable, according to what the Lord said to Elias, that where the whole people had fallen away to idolatry, he had reserved for himself seven thousand.”*³⁴

Paul immediately applies this historical pattern to his own generation: “Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace” (Romans 11:5). Just as God's covenant faithfulness was demonstrated in Elijah's day through the preservation of a remnant, so His faithfulness is demonstrated in the apostolic age through the existence of believing Jews. As William Hendriksen succinctly summarizes Paul's argument, “As it was then, says Paul, so it is now.”³⁵

The words “at this present time” show that Paul does not direct his readers to a distant epoch in which God's promises will finally be vindicated. Rather, he points to what the Lord is doing in his own day. The answer to the opening question is found in the present existence of the elect remnant. Paul is not introducing a new principle but appealing to one that has characterized God's dealings with His covenant people throughout history.

Henry comments:

*“In Elijah's time there was a remnant, and so there is now...a remnant of believing Jews when the rest were obstinate in their unbelief.... In them the promise of God has its accomplishment, and God's ancient kindness for that people is remembered.”*³⁶

Paul then explains why this remnant exists: “And if by grace, then is it no more of works” (Romans 11:6). Their preservation rests entirely upon God's sovereign grace. The distinction between the remnant and the rest of Israel is not grounded in ancestry or merit, but solely in God's electing mercy. This is entirely consistent with the argument Paul has developed since Romans 9:6, where he first distinguished the true Israel of promise from Israel according to the flesh.

The argument reaches one of its most decisive statements in verse 7: “the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded.” Here Paul explicitly divides Israel into two groups. On the one hand stands “the election,” who obtain the promised righteousness because they are the objects of God's gracious calling. On the other stands “the rest,” who remain under judicial hardening because of unbelief.

Throughout chapters 9–11 Paul consistently distinguishes between the elect within Israel and the unbelieving majority. Nowhere does he suggest that this distinction is temporary or that it will later be replaced by a different principle governing God's saving purpose. On the contrary, the categories established here continue to underlie everything that follows. Every subsequent reference to Israel in Romans 11 should therefore be understood within this framework unless Paul explicitly indicates otherwise.

Hendriksen makes the same point from another direction. Criticizing the common appeal to Romans 11:26 as overturning the remnant principle, he asks:

“The view of some—and among them those whose writings we regard highly—that a day is coming when this rule will no longer apply, in fact that the very principle of the remnant implies that one day the nation of Israel as a whole will be saved, seems rather strange. Are those who favor this opinion guilty of reading the words of Rom. 11:26 (‘And so all Israel shall be saved’), as they interpret it, into 11:5?”³⁷

Hendriksen is implying that instead of allowing the remnant principle established at the beginning of the chapter to govern the interpretation of what follows, many interpreters reverse Paul's order of argument by allowing a particular understanding of Romans 11:26 to redefine the meaning of Romans 11:5. Paul's own method proceeds in the opposite direction. He establishes the present remnant as the answer to the opening question and continues to build upon that foundation throughout the chapter.

The scriptural citations that conclude the section (Romans 11:8–10) reinforce rather than soften this conclusion. Drawing from Moses and David, Paul demonstrates that Israel's hardening is not an unforeseen interruption of God's plan of salvation but part of the pattern long revealed in Holy Scripture. David's prayer that God would “bow down their back alway” portrays the judicial hardening of the unbelieving majority as an ongoing condition.³⁸ Their unbelief confirms the word of God rather than contradicts the faithfulness of the Lord's covenant promises.

American commentator James B. Coffman (1905-2006) on Romans 11:10:

“Bow down thou their back always ... refers to the perpetual nature of the sentence imposed upon Israel, not referring exclusively to their being perpetually subjected, but to the endurance of the hardened condition finally imposed. Certainly, in this place, there is no suggestion that after certain centuries have passed, or after the Gentiles are saved, God will commute the sentence and restore them!”³⁹

The opening section of Romans 11 thus establishes the interpretive framework for the entire chapter. God has not cast away His people because He continues to save the elect remnant according to grace. His covenant is fulfilled not through the indiscriminate salvation of the nation as a whole, but through the salvation of the elect while the rest remain hardened.

6.2 The Redemptive Purpose of Israel's Stumbling (Romans 11:11–24)

Paul now turns from the existence of the remnant to the purpose served by Israel's stumbling. "Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid" (Romans 11:11). Israel's unbelief is not presented as a final collapse beyond all possibility of mercy, but as the occasion through which "salvation is come unto the Gentiles."

The gospel was proclaimed first to the Jews in city after city, in keeping with God's covenant order. When much of Israel rejected the message, the apostles increasingly turned to the Gentiles, who, by God's grace, received it in large numbers. Thus the unbelief of much of the Jewish nation became the occasion for the rapid spread of the gospel throughout the Gentile world. Israel's rejection did not frustrate God's redemptive purpose but became one of the means by which that purpose was advanced. What appeared to be a defeat for the gospel became, under God's sovereign providence, the means by which the nations were brought into the kingdom.

The apostle immediately adds that this Gentile salvation was intended "for to provoke them to jealousy" (Romans 11:11). God's purpose was not merely to save the Gentiles independently of Israel, but to use the salvation of the Gentiles as one of the means by which He would draw His elect from among the Jewish people.

Even Israel's unbelief became an instrument in the accomplishment of God's saving purpose, setting in motion the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles and, in turn, the salvation of the elect remnant in Israel.

In the next verse (Romans 11:12) Paul asks, "Now if the fall of them be the riches of the world, and the diminishing of them the riches of the Gentiles; how much more their fulness?" Many have read into this verse a far-off event, interpreting "fulness" to mean a great multitude of Jewish believers to be converted *en masse* at some point in history.

American Lutheran commentator R. C. H. Lenski (1864–1936) rejected the common view that "their fulness" refers to a future national restoration of Israel. He argued instead that Paul is speaking of the same salvation from which the majority of the Jews had fallen through unbelief and into the fulness of which the elect remnant had been restored through faith. He further observed that Paul did not need to repeat that this applied only to the elect remnant, since he had just established that distinction in the preceding verses.

He writes:

“Paul does not say... ‘much more will be or shall be their fulness in the future, at the millennium, or before the world ends.’ This is obviously untenable.’ ... ‘The meaning is: they fell from the salvation just mentioned; they lost this salvation; they again have the fulness of this salvation. Paul does not need to say that the latter applies only to a remnant of the Jews, for he has just said that in verses 5 and 7.”⁴⁰

Thus, rather than predicting a national restoration of Israel, Paul argues from the lesser to the greater. If the Jews' rejection of the gospel enriched the Gentiles, how much greater blessing would result from Jews embracing the gospel?

No future-tense verb appears in Romans 11:12, nothing in the wording requires the reader to leave the circumstances of Paul's own day, and the comparison itself suggests two aspects of the same present process rather than events separated by a vast interval of time. If Paul's language naturally fits the events of the apostolic age (and it does), there is no reason to postpone its fulfillment to a later era.

In fact, a remarkable ingathering of Jews did take place through the preaching of the gospel during this period. The book of Acts describes many thousands of Jews believing in Jerusalem and throughout the synagogues of the Roman world. Why should this remarkable ingathering of Jews during the apostolic age not be the “fulness” of which Paul speaks? Why should the reader suddenly understand “Israel” to mean every ethnic Jew when Paul has repeatedly demonstrated throughout Romans 9–11 that God's promises are fulfilled through the elect remnant?

Contemporary Presbyterian minister O. Palmer Robertson in his commentary on Romans 11 likewise argues that Paul's references to Israel's “fulness” and “receiving” do not introduce a new principle. Rather, the elect remnant described earlier in the chapter continues to be gathered throughout the gospel age until its full number has been brought in:

“The ‘receiving’ of the ‘full number’ in Israel will be realized in no way other than the way in which Israelites currently are being ‘received’ and added to the number. ... It is neither necessary nor appropriate to posit some future date in which the ‘remnant principle’ will be superseded by a newly introduced ‘fulness principle’. The completed number of the ‘remnant’ of Israel is identical precisely with the ‘fulness’ of Israel.”⁴¹

There appears no reason to regard “fulness” as a distant prophetic expectation rather than as a reference to the rich and abundant conversion of Jews to Christianity in the apostolic age. Israel's “fall” was already resulting in blessing to the Gentiles, while the reception of elect Jews within that same process brought still greater blessing. To insert an event presumed to occur thousands of years later disrupts the present flow of Paul's argument and introduces a development that neither the verse nor the chapter indicates.

It is also obvious from a plain reading of the following words in Romans 11:14 that Paul is describing a process then occurring in his own ministry. He says, “If by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them.” Paul is saying that his preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles is not only for their own benefit but is also intended to provoke his own people, the Jews, to jealousy. Here we see that the apostle expects the continuing conversion of Jews through his own preaching during the present age.

The phrase “save some of them” in Romans 11:14 is particularly striking. Paul speaks not of saving the nation, nor even of saving many Jews.

As English New Testament scholar C. K. Barrett (1917–2011) observes:

*“Paul’s hope here seems surprisingly limited ... ‘and so save some of them’ ... Out of the provocation of Israel as a whole (‘my flesh and blood’), there may come a few conversions.”*⁴²

Norwegian Lutheran theologian Sigurd Odland (1871–1944) likewise observed that Paul’s language leaves no indication that he expected a large-scale conversion of Israel:

*“That the apostle neither expects nor anticipates a mass conversion of Israel—though of course he cannot deny it as something inherently impossible—appears from verses 13–14, where he describes it as one purpose of his Gentile apostolic ministry to provoke unbelieving Israel to jealousy, yet explicitly indicates that his hope goes no further than to save ‘some of them.’”*⁴³

Paul’s expectation is not national renewal, but remnant salvation.

This fits with the remnant principle already established in Romans 9, 10, and the preceding verses of Romans 11. Rather than directing the reader’s attention to a national revival at some later date, Paul describes the continuing salvation of elect Jews through the ordinary ministry of the gospel in his own day.

The same pattern appears in verse 15: “if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?” The “receiving” is often treated as a future climactic restoration of the Jewish nation. Yet Paul has just spoken of his desire to “save some of them” (Romans 11:14). In light of the immediate context, the “receiving” of verse 15 is naturally understood as referring to this same ongoing reception of Jews through faith in Christ rather than to a separate national event in a later age. In this context, the expression “life from the dead” describes the extraordinary spiritual renewal accompanying this ingathering through the gospel, during which many thousands of Jews were converted. Though fleshly Israel as a whole remains hardened in unbelief, every elect Jew who comes to Christ is given “life from the dead” from within a spiritually dead nation.

This expression does not lead the reader to expect a conversion of Israel nationally at some point in the future. The immediate context contains no hint of any new prophetic

subject. Rather, Paul is speaking throughout this section of the effects produced by Israel's fall, the reconciliation of the world, his own ministry among the Gentiles, and the reception of some of the Jews through faith in the Lord Jesus. Every element of the discussion belongs to the same process already unfolding in the apostolic age.

Why should the reader suddenly abandon the subject Paul has been discussing and import an entirely different one into the passage?

If Paul had intended to shift suddenly from that present process to an event at the end of history, one would expect some indication of such a transition. Yet none is given. Instead, "life from the dead" appears as the climactic expression in a series of contrasts designed to magnify the blessing associated with the reception of Jews into Christ. The phrase functions as a vivid description of the life-giving power of the gospel in an otherwise dead nation rather than as the introduction of an entirely new subject.

A further point should be noted regarding the translation of Romans 11:15. The King James Version reads: "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" The wording suggests a future event, particularly through the phrase "shall ... be." Yet this impression is not derived from the Greek text itself. In fact, no future-tense verb appears anywhere in the verse. The words "be" and "shall be" are italicized in the KJV because they have been supplied by the translators and are not represented by any corresponding Greek verb. Literally, the text reads: "For if their rejection [is] the reconciliation of the world, what [is] their reception except life from the dead?" The verse provides no grammatical basis for a shift to a later event. The future sense commonly inferred from the English translation is not present in the Greek text.

American commentator Moses E. Lard (1818-1880) candidly acknowledged the insertion of these "necessary" words in his commentary on Romans 11:15:

*"Here again we supply 'will be' or 'shall be,' and so make the apostle assert the future conversion of the Jews. This course seems necessitated by the nature of the case."*⁴⁴

Whatever one makes of Lard's conclusion, he acknowledges that the shift to a chronologically remote event is not signaled by the text itself. Rather, the future tense has been supplied by the translators because the interpretation is already assumed.

Paul then introduces the olive tree imagery (Romans 11:16–24). Some branches are broken off because of unbelief, while Gentiles are grafted in among the remaining branches and partake "of the root and fatness of the olive tree." The governing principle is stated explicitly: "because of unbelief they were broken off, and thou standest by faith" (Romans 11:20). Paul's warning to the Gentiles excludes all presumption based upon ethnic status or outward privilege.

The same condition governs the restoration of Jews: "they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in" (Romans 11:23). As Charles Hodge observes,

“Neither one nor the other, simply because Jew or Gentile, is either retained in the church or excluded from it. As the one continues in this relation to God, only on condition of faith, so the other is excluded by his unbelief alone.”⁴⁵

The ingrafting described by Paul therefore rests upon the same principle found throughout the chapter: not ethnicity, but faith; not descent, but belief.

It is also significant what Paul does not say here. Hendriksen draws attention to the absence of any promise that all unbelieving Jews will one day be restored:

“Note that the apostle does not say or imply that one day all unbelieving Jews are going to be grafted back into their own olive tree, are going to be saved. He carefully avoids saying anything of the kind. He states that the regrafting will take place ‘if they do not persist in their unbelief.’ Undoubtedly what he means is, ‘Some will persist; others will not.’ This interpretation is in line with previous statements about the hardened majority and the saved minority or remnant.”⁴⁶

Hendriksen is not merely appealing to silence. Rather, he is observing that at precisely the point where Paul discusses the grafting in of unbelieving Jews, he neither states nor implies the future restoration often read into the passage. Instead, he reaffirms the same remnant principle that has governed the argument from the beginning: some remain in unbelief, while others are brought to faith.

The olive tree imagery continues the same process already described throughout the chapter rather than introducing a distinct future national dispensation.

6.3 The Culmination of the Argument (Romans 11:25–32)

Yet when the passage is followed in sequence, its larger context considered, and its language examined, the apostle is seen to continue describing the same process already developed throughout the chapter, while the introduction of a separate and much later dispensation proves to be an interpretation brought to the text rather than derived from it.

6.3.1 Paul’s Explanation of the Mystery

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” (Romans 11:25)

He begins: “For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery” (Romans 11:25). In Paul’s writings, a “mystery” (μυστήριον) is not a truth that remains hidden, but one that has been revealed. Paul describes “the mystery of Christ” as something that “in other ages was not made known” but “is now revealed” (Ephesians 3:4–5), and speaks of “the revelation of the mystery” that was “kept secret” but is “now made manifest” (Romans 16:25–26). The term refers to a divine purpose formerly concealed and now disclosed through the gospel.

Paul continues: “that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” The hardening described is partial rather than total because it rests upon the unbelieving majority of Israel, while a remnant continues to believe according to the election of grace.

A key element of the futurist view is the claim that the phrase “in part” refers to duration rather than extent. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for example, argued that Israel's hardening is temporary and will eventually be removed.⁴⁷ The immediate context, however, points in another direction. Throughout Romans 11 Paul repeatedly distinguishes between the elect remnant and the hardened remainder (Romans 11:5–7). Consistent with the context, the hardening is “in part” because it does not encompass all Israelites.

American Lutheran theologian Elling Hove (1863–1927) commented on this point:

*“The expression ‘in part’ (ἀπὸ μέρους, ex parte), does not mean ‘for a time,’ ‘temporarily,’ as some interpreters wish to understand this expression.... It here denotes a restriction of the numbers of the hardened, not a restriction of the duration of the hardening.... a part, and that even the greatest part of the Jews are hardened, and another part not hardened.”*⁴⁸

One objection frequently raised against the interpretation defended in this article is that it fails to account for Paul's description of this teaching as a “mystery.” Lloyd-Jones, after describing the view that “all Israel” refers to the aggregate of elect Jews saved throughout the centuries, rejected it on the ground that “there is no mystery about that.” If the passage merely teaches that individual Jews continue to be converted and that, in the end, all the elect among them will have been gathered in, then, he argued, “the whole element of mystery has completely gone.”⁴⁹ The mystery, it is contended, must consist in some future event not already apparent in the ordinary progress of the gospel, namely a large-scale conversion of the Jewish people.

Hove, however, rightly rejected the assumption that the “mystery” of Romans 11:25 must refer to an extraordinary event near the end of history. Commenting on Paul's use of the term, he observed:

*“Important points in the development of God's Kingdom, and in the economy of God's grace are also called mysteries, as for instance, that the Gentiles, who had once been excluded from the civil rights of Israel, in the fullness of time became joint heirs and partakers of the promises of God through the Gospel. We find, therefore, that the word ‘mystery’ is not used only to denote an event which is exclusively of the future and is by no means always an extraordinary eschatological miracle.”*⁵⁰

Paul's own explanation of the mystery confirms this understanding. His purpose is not merely to announce a mystery but to reveal it so that his readers “should not be ignorant” (Romans 11:25). One therefore naturally expects the revelation itself to illuminate the matter under discussion.

If the futurist reading is followed, however, the mystery Paul claims to reveal remains remarkably undefined. Rather than explaining the matter, it leaves numerous questions unanswered. Who precisely constitutes “all Israel”? Does it refer to every ethnic Jew living at some point in time? Does it refer to the great majority of them? Does it refer only to some of them? By what means will this conversion take place? When will it occur? Will it coincide with a widespread revival long before Christ's return, or only immediately preceding His appearing? How does it relate to the other events associated with the return of Christ? How are we to account for the fact that the great majority of the Jewish people have perished in their sins for nearly two millennia? The wide diversity of answers given by proponents of the futurist position illustrates how unclear their definition of the mystery remains, and it can hardly be said that the mystery has been revealed if the essential attributes of it remain unknown.

This is not to suggest that every prophecy, if indeed this is one, must answer every conceivable question. The problem is that the futurist interpretation fails to accomplish what Paul says he is doing in this passage: revealing the mystery so that his readers “should not be ignorant” (Romans 11:25). Instead of dispelling his readers' ignorance, it leaves them with more questions than answers.

But if we look at the present-day occurrences described by Paul, the mystery becomes clear. Throughout Romans 11, he explains that Israel's rejection of the gospel became the occasion for the salvation of the Gentiles. Through Israel's “fall” salvation came to the Gentiles (Romans 11:11). Their “diminishing” became “the riches of the Gentiles” (Romans 11:12), and their “casting away” brought “the reconciling of the world” (Romans 11:15). Yet this was not a one-way movement from Israel to the Gentiles. Gentile salvation, in turn, was intended “to provoke them to jealousy” (Romans 11:11). Paul's own ministry among the Gentiles pursued this very purpose: “if by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them” (Romans 11:14). The same is again stated later in the chapter: the Gentiles “have now obtained mercy through their unbelief” (Romans 11:30), that is, through the unbelief of the Jews, while Israel in turn obtains mercy “through your mercy” (Romans 11:31), that is, through the mercy shown to the Gentiles. The entire process belongs to the present redemption Paul is describing, not to successive stages separated by long intervals of time.

This, then, is the mystery Paul reveals: God ordained Israel's partial hardening so that the Jews' rejection of the gospel would cause the apostles to proclaim the gospel among the Gentiles, where, according to His sovereign purpose, it would be embraced in large numbers. Through the salvation of the Gentiles, He would then provoke His elect among the Jews to jealousy and bring them also to faith in Christ. This astonishing work of God had remained hidden until He disclosed it by divine revelation in this portion of the Epistle to the Romans. Left to themselves, men could never have concluded that God had ordained Israel's unbelief as one of the principal means by which He would fulfill His covenant promises. What appeared to many to be evidence

that God's promises had failed was, in reality, one of the principal means by which He was fulfilling those promises.

6.3.2 The Word “Until” Does Not Indicate a Change

“...that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” (Romans 11:25b)

Much has been made of the word “until” (ἄχρι οὗ), in verse 25 where it is written, “blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” “Until” here is often read as indicating a change in circumstances, as though the word means, “afterward, something very different will happen.” In this case, it is assumed that Israel’s hardening will be reversed after the Gentile mission is complete. Yet while the word “until” is sometimes associated with a later change of circumstances, that conclusion cannot be derived from the term alone.

Thayer's lexicon, for example, defines ἄχρι as denoting the point up to which something continues.⁵¹ Accordingly, the expression ἄχρι οὗ identifies the period during which a condition persists but does not, by itself, determine what follows thereafter. Several theologians have likewise recognized that the expression does not, in itself, require the future reversal assumed by many.

Coffman notes in his commentary:

“This is sincerely thought by many to mean that the hardness will cease at whatever time is indicated by "until"; and, in all fairness, the word could mean that, and often does, as, for example, when it was written that Joseph knew not his wife Mary "until" she brought forth her firstborn son and laid him in the manger (Matthew 1:25). The problem lies in the utter lack of authority in any man to affirm that a particular meaning must be understood here. The other frequent meaning of "until" leaves all thought of termination out of sight. R. L. Whiteside called attention to this, thus:

“...the preposition "until" does not tell what will follow the event or events mentioned in the phrase it introduces, or governs. Consider a few examples: “And the waters decreased continually until the tenth month” (Genesis 8:5). That does not indicate any change after the tenth month: the record shows that the waters continued to decrease. “Thy servants have been keepers of cattle from our youth even until now” (Genesis 46:32). This does not mean that they were then going out of the cattle business. “My Father worketh even until now” (John 5:17). And, of course, God kept on working as he always has. “For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth until now” (Romans 8:22). Nor did Paul mean that the creation quit groaning upon the publication of Romans.”⁵²

This same limitation is clearly understood in everyday language. If someone says, “I am going to work hard until I have enough money to buy a house,” the statement itself

does not indicate what the man will do after he has bought the house. It could be assumed that he will stop working hard or cease working altogether at that point, but his use of the word “until” neither implies nor requires that conclusion. The statement has reference only to the period between the present and “until” the man has enough money to buy a house, and tells us nothing about how hard he intends to work afterward. In fact, it would be most reasonable to assume that he will continue to work hard, since that is the habit of a diligent man.

Lutheran commentator R. C. H. Lenski (1864–1936) likewise rejects the common appeal to the word “until” in Romans 11:25:

“Now it does at times mean that something lasts ‘until’ a certain time and then ceases to last, but it is also used with reference to a terminus merely, and nothing is implied as to what follows that terminus. ... For the Jewish petrification will most certainly cease forever when the fulness of the Gentiles has come in: the last judgment will then arrive ... The idea that ‘until’ means that the petrification will be converted into softness is untenable.”⁵³

Indeed, Paul himself uses “until” in this way earlier in the Epistle to the Romans. He writes, “For until the law sin was in the world” (Romans 5:13), yet no one concludes that sin ceased to exist once the law was given.

The word “until” therefore indicates the continuation of a condition up to a specified point but does not, by itself, determine what follows afterward. To infer from the word itself that the hardening of Romans 11:25 must at some point be removed is to draw a conclusion the text does not state.

Yet many advocates of the futurist view treat the word “until” as implying far more than mere duration, construing it to require (1) a dramatic reversal in Israel’s condition, (2) a transition to a time period far removed from Paul’s own day, and (3) the introduction of a national conversion nowhere stated in the passage. The word itself establishes none of these conclusions and they cannot be demonstrated from the context.

6.3.3 No Matter How “The Fulness of the Gentiles” Is Interpreted, It Tells Us Nothing About What Follows

“...until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in.” (Romans 11:25b)

Moving on to consider the larger phrase “until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” we encounter more than one possible meaning; it does not require the futurist interpretation often insisted upon. The words need not denote a precise endpoint in history when all the elect of every nation have been brought into the kingdom, but could refer to the great ingathering of the Gentile nations characteristic of the apostolic age or the entire Messianic era itself. Under the old covenant, the true religion of God was confined principally within Israel, whereas under the gospel the covenant community extends the kingdom worldwide through Christ. This could be the “fulness” of which Paul speaks. That it may be so is supported by Paul’s earlier use of the same

word “fulness” in Romans 11:12, where the term itself does not naturally denote a temporal boundary, but rather fullness in the sense of rich inclusion or ingathering.

On this understanding, “the fulness of the Gentiles” either refers to the expansion of the Church to all nations that marked the apostolic era, or that as a beginning point to continue through the ages, rather than to a distant transition preceding a restoration of the Jewish people on a large scale.

Along with others, seventeenth-century Dutch jurist and theologian Hugo Grotius (1583–1645) likewise connected the “fulness” of the Gentiles in Romans 11 with apostolic times. English Nonconformist Presbyterian James Calvert (1603–1672), agreeing with Grotius, summarized his view in the book *Naphtali*:

*“Fulness here,” says Grotius, “as above in verse 12, means a great multitude of Gentiles easily surpassing the number of unbelieving Jews. This was formerly fulfilled through the journeys of Paul, many of which he undertook after writing this epistle.”*⁵⁴

Herman Ridderbos, like many interpreters on both sides of the issue, understood “the fullness (Greek *plērōma*) of the Gentiles” to refer not merely to the completion of Gentile evangelism but to the complete number of Gentiles whom God has purposed to save—that is, all the elect of the nations. Commenting on Romans 11:25, he defines *plērōma* as “the full number fixed by God.”⁵⁵

But whether “fulness” describes the extent of the Gentile ingathering in the apostolic age, the duration of that ingathering through successive ages, or its final numerical completion, makes little difference. The fact remains that Romans 11:25 does not tell us what follows its accomplishment, or even that anything follows it. It is entirely possible that the hardening of the Jews of which Paul spoke, and which has now continued for many centuries, will continue unabated “until the fulness of the Gentiles” has been brought to completion at the end of the world. As noted earlier, Lenski observed that “...the Jewish petrification will most certainly cease forever when the fulness of the Gentiles has come in: the last judgment will then arrive.”⁵⁶ Nothing in Romans 11:25 itself requires us to insert a national conversion of Israel between the completion of the Gentile ingathering and the end of the age.

Coffman, proceeding from the same understanding of the word “until” set forth in the previous section and applying it to the larger phrase “until the fulness of the Gentiles,” correctly concludes of Romans 11:25, “Thus, in this very place where the future conversion theory regarding Israel is supposed to be promised, it does not appear,” observing that the passage “simply does not tell what will happen after the fullness of the Gentiles is come in.”⁵⁷

6.3.4 “And So” Does Not Mean “And After This”

“And so all Israel shall be saved....” (Romans 11:26a)

One of the greatest obstacles to an objective reading of Romans 11:26 is that many begin a study of the passage having already assumed a particular interpretation. Because the verse has long been cited as the classic proof text for a future conversion of the Jewish people, the interpretation is frequently accepted before the passage itself is carefully examined. As a result, many readers unconsciously interpret Paul's words as though they meant “*and after this* all Israel shall be saved,” rather than his actual words, “*and so* all Israel shall be saved.” Once adopted, this assumption becomes difficult to dislodge.

A great deal depends upon how the phrase “and so” (καὶ οὕτως) is understood. Many interpreters effectively read this expression as introducing an event that follows the completion of the Gentile mission. Yet the Greek words do not themselves naturally convey the sense of “after this” or “then.” Rather, it ordinarily directs attention to the manner in which something occurs. Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon explains the word οὕτως as meaning “in this manner, thus, so,” further stating that it refers to “the manner spoken of” or “the way described.”⁵⁸ Paul's language therefore directs attention to the manner in which Israel is saved rather than itself expressing the idea of a new chronological stage following the Gentile mission.

Paul is not saying, “And *afterward* all Israel shall be saved,” but, “And *in this way* all Israel shall be saved.” That is, through the very process he has just described: the partial hardening of Israel, the ingathering of the Gentiles, and the continued salvation of the elect remnant within Israel itself.

As Robertson puts it:

*“By the phrase καὶ οὕτως as it introduces Romans 11:26, Paul does not look prospectively into the future beyond the ‘fullness of the Gentiles.’ Instead, he looks retrospectively into the past. He recalls to the mind of his readers the fantastic processes of God’s salvation among the Jews as he just had described them.”*⁵⁹

Dutch Reformed theologian Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) also emphasized that the words “and so” (καὶ οὕτως) do not introduce a new stage in God's dealings with Israel but describe the manner in which “all Israel” is saved. Commenting on Romans 11:25–26, he wrote:

*“If Paul in 11:25 wanted to communicate a new fact, the manner in which he does this is most surprising. For he does not say: and then, thereafter, namely after the fullness of the Gentiles has entered in, shall all Israel [be saved], but: καὶ οὕτως πᾶς Ἰσραὴλ σωθήσεται, and in that way all Israel shall be saved. That cannot mean anything other than: in that way, as described in the preceding verses.”*⁶⁰

6.3.5 “All Israel” Has Already Been Repeatedly Defined

“And so all Israel shall be saved....” (Romans 11:26a)

As stated above, futurist interpreters often approach Romans 11:26 with a conclusion in hand. Many readers arrive at the words “all Israel shall be saved” already assuming that Paul is referring to the future salvation of the Jews.

Yet this assumption can only be maintained by reading Romans 11:26 in isolation from the argument that precedes it. It requires setting aside three chapters of careful distinctions and assigning to “all Israel” a meaning different from the one Paul has consistently given the term.

What has Paul been arguing since Romans 9:6? Has he not repeatedly distinguished between the totality of ethnic Israel and the elect within Israel? Has he not appealed to Isaac and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, the remnant in Isaiah, the seven thousand in Elijah's day, and the remnant according to grace in his own day? Has he not repeatedly shown that God's promises are fulfilled not in the nation indiscriminately, but in the elect whom God calls and saves?

Why then, when we arrive at “and so all Israel shall be saved,” are we suddenly expected to forget everything that came before? Why should the remnant become the nation, the elect become the entire ethnic people, and the distinction Paul has spent three chapters establishing simply vanish from the discussion?

Throughout Romans 9–11 Paul repeatedly returns to this distinction in different forms. He speaks of “the children of the promise” rather than all Abraham's descendants (Romans 9:8), of a remnant rather than the nation as a whole (Romans 9:27; 11:5), of “the election” in contrast to “the rest” (Romans 11:7), and of the salvation of “some of them” (Romans 11:14) rather than of Israel indiscriminately. The same distinction appears repeatedly in different forms. It is not a passing observation but one of the controlling themes of Romans 9–11.

Hendriksen expressed the same concern:

*“The reader has not been prepared for the idea of a mass conversion of Israelites. All along Paul stresses the very opposite, namely, the salvation, in any age (past, present, future) of a remnant.... If Rom. 11:26 actually teaches a mass conversion of Jews, would it not seem as if Paul is saying, ‘Forget what I told you previously?’”*⁶¹

Odland likewise concluded in his commentary on Romans 11:26:

“Already what was set forth in Romans 9:6–29 appears to argue against the existence of a promise of salvation for the physically descended Israel from the patriarchs as a national whole. In Romans 9:6 and following, the apostle clearly and sharply maintained that God's word of promise never from the

*beginning had reference to Israel as such: "They are not all Israel which are of Israel."*⁶²

An objection may be raised that the addition of the word "all" in Romans 11:26 enlarges the meaning of "Israel." But the adjective "all" does not establish a new definition for the noun it modifies. Rather, it presupposes the definition Paul has already established. Thus, "all Israel" denotes the totality of the Israel Paul has been describing throughout Romans 9–11. Since Paul has consistently distinguished the Israel of God's promise from Israel according to the flesh, the addition of the word "all" cannot suddenly expand the term to include every Israelite.

The burden of proof rests upon those who argue that Paul suddenly abandons the distinction that has governed his argument from Romans 9:6 onward. Having repeatedly distinguished between ethnic Israel generally and the elect within Israel, why should the reader assume that this framework disappears precisely at the moment Paul declares, "and so all Israel shall be saved"? Indeed, Paul had already laid the foundation for this distinction even earlier in the epistle when he wrote, "He is not a Jew, which is one outwardly... but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly" (Romans 2:28–29). Throughout Romans, covenant identity is determined not by physical descent alone but by God's gracious calling and the faith that receives His promise.

6.3.6 Must "Israel" Have the Same Meaning in Verses 25 and in 26?

"For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved...." (Romans 11:25–26a)

It has been objected by many that the present interpretation requires an unnatural change of meaning in the word "Israel" in two consecutive verses. According to the position advocated in this article, "Israel" in Romans 11:25 ("blindness in part is happened to Israel") refers to the Jewish nation generally, while "Israel" in Romans 11:26 ("and so all Israel shall be saved") refers more particularly to the elect within Israel. The objection put forth by many is that the same meaning must be retained in both verses because of their close proximity. Since the first occurrence plainly refers to the nation as a whole, it is argued that the second must do the same.

Yet this does not follow. Paul himself demonstrates that the term Israel may be used in more than one sense within the same discussion. In Romans 9:6 he writes, "For they are not all Israel, which are of Israel." Here the word Israel is used twice in a single sentence with two distinct meanings: first of ethnic Israel generally, and then of the elect within Israel. No one disputes the distinction, since interpreting both occurrences as synonyms would make nonsense of Paul's statement.

Romans 9:6 demonstrates more than Paul's ability to use the word Israel in two senses within the same context. In both Romans 9:6 and Romans 11:25–26 the same distinction is in view: ethnic Israel generally and the elect within Israel. Thus, when

Paul speaks of blindness happening to Israel (verse 25) and then declares that all Israel shall be saved (verse 26), he is applying the principle established at the outset of his argument two chapters earlier.

Throughout Romans 9–11 he repeatedly distinguishes between the nation considered broadly and the elect remnant within it. Only a few verses earlier Paul had stated explicitly: “the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Romans 11:7). The futurist position thus understands the blinded majority of Romans 11:7 to be the saved Israel of Romans 11:26. Yet Paul gives no indication that such a reversal has occurred. The more natural reading is that he continues to operate with the same distinction between the elect remnant and the hardened majority that governs the entire discussion.

The objection that the two occurrences of “Israel” in verses 25 and 26 must be synonymous goes beyond the evidence. It assumes that Paul is somehow barred from employing the term Israel in more than one sense within the same immediate context, yet Romans 9:6 demonstrates precisely the opposite.

Some will still object that the plain meaning of “all Israel” is “all the Jews.” But there is no such obvious and fixed meaning. The term Israel may refer to Jacob personally (Genesis 32:28), to the northern kingdom as distinct from Judah (1 Kings 12:20), to the Jewish nation generally, or to the elect within Israel, as in Romans 9:6. Likewise, the term “Jew” is used with contextual flexibility. In John 7:1 we read that “the Jews sought to kill him,” though the people seeking Jesus' death were not every individual Jew but a particular group among them. Likewise, Paul declares that “he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly” (Romans 2:28), distinguishing between a spiritual identity and a merely fleshly one. Similarly, in John 8 Jesus addresses men who are called “Jews” and yet denies that they are truly Abraham's children in the spiritual sense (John 8:39–44). On the other hand, Gentile believers are described as “the children of Abraham” (Galatians 3:7) and as “Abraham's seed” (Galatians 3:29), demonstrating that covenantal language associated with Israel may be applied to those who are not Jews by natural descent. The same contextual principle applies to Paul's use of Israel in Romans 11:26.

Context determines the meaning of these terms, not an assumed fixed definition.

If “all Israel” means the Jewish nation as a whole, the phrase is difficult to reconcile with nearly two millennia of Jewish unbelief. Whatever one's expectations of the future, the dominant reality since Paul's day has not been national salvation but national rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The overwhelming majority of Jews who have lived since the apostolic age have died outside of faith in Him. If Paul intended “all Israel shall be saved” to mean “all the Jews shall be saved,” it is a remarkably strange way of describing the actual course of Jewish history.

Ridderbos raised the same objection, arguing that if “all Israel” refers only to a generation living at the end of history, then the expression can scarcely be said to encompass Israel as a nation:

“Can one say that Israel as a nation is completely saved, if one must understand by that a fraction of the nation, the small part of this nation that finally reaches the finish line of history?... What are we to think of all the unbelieving and disobedient members of the nation of Israel who have lived before the coming of Christ?... If, however, these do not belong to ‘all Israel,’ how then can one by ‘all Israel’ still understand national Israel?”⁶³

6.3.7 Has Paul Suddenly Shifted to the Distant Future and to National Israel in Verses 25-26?

“For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. And so all Israel shall be saved....” (Romans 11:25–26a).

Having addressed the objection concerning the meaning of Israel in verses 25–26, it remains to consider how this interpretation relates to the broader temporal framework of Paul's argument.

The futurist view requires that Paul, near the end of a discussion devoted to the circumstances of his own day, make a sudden and unannounced leap to a distant age. Throughout Romans 9–11, Paul speaks of the unbelief of his Jewish contemporaries, the salvation of the elect remnant, and the ongoing ingathering of the Gentiles. Yet the futurist interpretation requires that, when he reaches verses 25–26, he abruptly leaves the realities under discussion and begins speaking of events far removed from his own time.

Paul's words must first be understood as they would naturally have been understood by the Christians to whom the Epistle to the Romans was originally addressed. Nothing in Romans 11:25–26 suggests that Paul has suddenly ceased explaining the circumstances then unfolding before his readers and begun predicting events that would remain unfulfilled for thousands of years. Rather, he says that he is making known a “mystery” so that they “should not be ignorant.” The natural expectation is that he is explaining the significance of the present situation they were witnessing, not introducing a far-off event of which the passage itself gives no indication.

The futurist view also requires the distinction between the elect remnant and the hardened majority—maintained throughout Romans 9–11—to disappear precisely when Paul reaches the climactic phrase “all Israel shall be saved.” Yet no indication of such a shift is given. The most natural reading is that Paul continues to operate with the same distinction that has governed the discussion from the beginning.

Dutch Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) likewise rejected the notion that Paul abruptly changes the line of argument when he reaches Romans 11:26:

“All Israel’ is to be understood as a designation, not of the whole nation, but of the whole number of the elect out of the ancient covenant people... the apostle said at the beginning of his discussion that the promises were for the spiritual Israel; there is no evidence of a change of thought in the intervening section, so that this would come as a surprise in 11:26.”⁶⁴

This same continuity of Paul's argument was recognized by many earlier Protestant expositors. John Lightfoot (1602–1675), a member of the Westminster Assembly, understood Paul's purpose in Romans 11 differently. He states:

“For his drift, in that chapter, is not to determine, whether all the Jews should be once called [i.e., in the future]; but whether all the Jews were wholly cast off [i.e., in the present]; and this he states, that ‘there is a remnant’ that ‘the election hath obtained, but the rest are blinded’ and ‘that blindness in part is happened to Israel,’ etc. And this is the mystery, that he there speaketh of; and not, as some would wrest it, their universal conversion.”⁶⁵

Likewise, Hugo Grotius interpreted the “fulness” of the Gentiles as “a great multitude of Gentiles easily surpassing the number of the Jews who did not believe,” maintaining that “this was fulfilled through the journeys of Paul, many of which he undertook after writing this epistle.” Grotius further stated that “the time was near when not merely a few, as formerly, but a great multitude of Jews would embrace Christ,”⁶⁶ referring to developments already approaching in the apostolic age and the early centuries of Christianity. Anglican theologian Henry Hammond (1605–1660) similarly argued that Romans 11 applied “to those first times in which this epistle was written.”⁶⁷

The alternative interpretation, by contrast, requires the principal fulfillment of Paul's words to be transferred from the apostolic age to the final generations of Jews living immediately before the return of Christ. This raises an important question concerning the generations of Jews who have lived since Paul's day.

If “all Israel” refers primarily to the generation of ethnic Jews living immediately before Christ's return, then what is to be said of the countless generations of Jews who have lived and died in unbelief over nearly two thousand years? Why should only the final generation become the special object of the promised conversion while all the preceding generations perish under the same hardening? If this is the principal demonstration of God's continuing covenant favor toward ethnic Israel, why has that favor been withheld from generation after generation of Jews while only a tiny fraction have embraced the Savior?

Hove likewise exposed the implausibility of identifying “all Israel” with a latter-day generation of Jews while excluding all the generations that had lived before them, and he found no scriptural warrant for expecting that generation to experience an extraordinary large-scale conversion:

“The last living generation of Jews never can become anything else than a fraction of the whole Israel, whose history extends back through thousands of years.... What is there in Scripture which warrants or supports the opinion that even the last living generation of Jews shall experience such an extraordinary conversion?”⁶⁸

6.3.8 The Deliverer Who Has Already Come

“As it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob: For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.” (Romans 11:26b–27)

Continuing on to the latter half of Romans 11:26, Paul states: “as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob.” The language is drawn principally from Isaiah 59:20, a prophecy given centuries before the advent of Christ. The future tense of the quotation reflects Isaiah's perspective, not Paul's. When Isaiah spoke, the Deliverer had not yet come.

This manner of expression is not unusual in the New Testament. Old Testament prophecies are frequently cited in the form in which they were originally written even when their fulfillment had already occurred. For example, Matthew quotes Isaiah's prophecy, “Behold, a virgin *shall be* with child, and *shall bring* forth a son” (Matthew 1:23), retaining the tense of the original prophecy despite applying it to the already-accomplished birth of Christ. The mere presence of future-tense language in the quotation of an Old Testament prophet does not establish that the event remained future from the standpoint of the New Testament writer.

The future tense of Romans 11:26b reflects Isaiah's perspective rather than Paul's. What was future for Isaiah was not future for Paul.

Once this principle is recognized, the burden shifts to those who regard the citation as referring to an event still future from Paul's standpoint. If this passage is not referring to Christ's first advent and the saving work accomplished through the gospel in the apostolic age, then to what period does it refer? Is Paul directing his readers to a future appearance of the Deliverer distinct from the coming of Christ already proclaimed throughout the New Testament?

Defenders of the futurist interpretation often speak confidently of a national conversion of Israel. Yet Romans 11:26–27 itself says nothing about this. The passage directs attention not to a future Deliverer, but to the Deliverer who had already come.

When Paul wrote Romans, Jesus Christ had already been born, had completed His earthly ministry, had died and risen again, and had ascended to the Father's right hand. The words “there shall come” therefore cannot be understood as describing an event still future from Paul's standpoint, but rather as part of a prophecy whose fulfillment had already begun in Christ.

Hove likewise understood Paul's quotation of Isaiah to refer to Christ's accomplished work of redemption rather than to a latter-day national restoration:

*“What is here set forth also agrees entirely with the Biblical passage which Paul here adduces as a reason for what he has said. The quotation is, in substance, from Isaiah 59:20, 21, in a somewhat abbreviated and compressed form (something which, by the way, often occurs), and, as is generally acknowledged, the quotation treats of Christ's first coming to the world and of the salvation from sin and of the remission of sins which Christ then should purchase....”*⁶⁹

The citation provides no indication that Paul is directing his readers to an epoch beyond the apostolic age. On the contrary, he appeals to a Deliverer who had already “come out of Zion” to “turn ungodliness away from Jacob” and who was even then fulfilling a “covenant unto them” to “take away their sins.”

6.3.9 The Same Remnant Pattern Continues

“As concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes. For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance. For as ye in times past have not believed God, yet have now obtained mercy through their unbelief: Even so have these also now not believed, that through your mercy they also may obtain mercy. For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all.” (Romans 11:28–32)

Paul proceeds to describe Israel in its present dual condition: “as concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes: but as touching the election, they are beloved for the fathers' sakes” (Romans 11:28). Israel stands hardened in large measure with respect to the gospel, yet God's electing purpose remains operative according to the covenant promises made to the fathers.

Paul is not contrasting two successive stages in Israel's history, but describing two concurrent realities existing in his own day.

This verse is often cited as proof that the Jewish nation as a whole continues to occupy a special covenantal status before the Lord. Yet with respect to the gospel, Israel in its unbelief stands as an enemy. With respect to election, there remains within Israel a people beloved for the fathers' sakes. Far from reversing the distinction established throughout Romans 9–11, Paul is reaffirming it.

The same principle governs the statement that follows: “For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Romans 11:29). Some appeal to this verse as though it referred indiscriminately to all the children of Israel. Yet Paul has already spent three chapters explaining that the promises never belonged equally to every descendant of Abraham. The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable because God's saving purpose cannot fail. The verse guarantees not the future salvation of the Jews as a nation, but the certainty that all whom the Lord has purposed to save will indeed be saved.

The apostle then draws Jews and Gentiles together under the same pattern of mercy. Gentiles “in times past have not believed God,” yet have now obtained mercy through Israel's unbelief. Likewise, Jews who now remain in unbelief may also obtain mercy through the mercy shown to the Gentiles (Romans 11:30–31).

Robertson observes that Paul continues to emphasize present realities:

“The threefold ‘now’ (νῦν) of these concluding verses indicates that Paul's emphasis on the present responsiveness of Israel continues to be his central concern. Gentiles now have obtained mercy; Jews now have been disobedient, that they also now may obtain mercy.”⁷⁰

Significantly, Paul does not introduce a new or future manner in which Israel will obtain mercy. The same pattern that has governed the entire chapter continues unchanged. Jews and Gentiles alike obtain mercy through the same gospel, at the same present time, and within the same gracious purpose of God. Nothing in these closing verses suggests that Paul has shifted from the present salvation of the elect remnant to a distinct conversion of the Jewish nation sometime later in history.

The section concludes: “For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all” (Romans 11:32). Read in light of the argument developed throughout Romans 9–11, the statement does not teach the indiscriminate salvation of every individual Jew or Gentile, but summarizes the common condition of both alike under sin and the common way in which both alike obtain mercy through Christ.

6.3.10 The Doxology: Paul Glorifies God for What He Is Doing

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”
(Romans 11:33–36)

Paul concludes his discussion of Israel and the Gentiles with one of the most sublime expressions of praise in all of Scripture. This doxology is not an abrupt change of subject, nor is it merely a fitting devotional conclusion to an important theological discussion. It is Paul's inspired response to the argument he has just completed. Having explained the mystery of God's dealings with Israel and the Gentiles, he pauses to marvel at the wisdom displayed in God's plan of salvation. The doxology therefore serves as the conclusion of the chapter and provides an important key to its interpretation. It invites the reader to ask why the revelation Paul has just unfolded should evoke such profound admiration for the wisdom of God.

Paul does not simply extol the power or faithfulness of God, though both have been evident throughout the epistle. Rather, he marvels especially at the wisdom of God. Wisdom concerns not merely the accomplishment of an end, but the marvelous

ordering of the means by which that end is attained. It is precisely this aspect of God's work that has occupied Romans 9–11. Paul has shown that the apparent failure of God's promises is no failure at all. The widespread unbelief of Israel, which seemed to call God's covenant faithfulness into question, has itself become the occasion for the extension of the gospel to the Gentiles. The salvation of the Gentiles, in turn, serves God's purpose in gathering His elect from among Israel. What appeared to be a contradiction is revealed as a harmonious and perfectly ordered design. It is this astonishing wisdom that overwhelms the apostle.

The immediate context confirms this. Immediately before the doxology, Paul writes:

“For God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all” (Romans 11:32).

This statement does more than summarize the preceding verses; it brings Paul's argument in Romans 9–11 to its climax. Jews and Gentiles alike stand condemned apart from grace. Neither possesses any claim upon the mercy of God. The salvation of both proceeds entirely from divine mercy according to God's sovereign purpose. According to Paul's doctrine in these chapters, man's disobedience, far from frustrating the divine plan, becomes the occasion for the display of divine mercy. Such a design could never have been conceived by wisdom of men. Small wonder, then, that Paul immediately exclaims, “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!”

If the mystery consists not primarily in a future event, but in the explanation of God's present work of salvation, the doxology follows quite naturally. Paul is not simply rejoicing that the Lord will someday perform another great act in history. He is marveling that the entire pattern of redemption, now being revealed to him by the Spirit, displays a wisdom beyond man's comprehension. The very events that seemed to threaten the fulfillment of God's promises have become the means by which those promises are accomplished. Israel's stumbling has served the salvation of the Gentiles. The salvation of the Gentiles serves God's purpose in gathering His elect from Israel. Mercy triumphs over universal disobedience. Every element of the plan contributes to the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose.

This understanding also explains why Paul concludes with quotations emphasizing the incomprehensibility of God's wisdom:

“For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?”
(Romans 11:34–35).

No man could have conceived such a plan. No one could have advised God to accomplish His purpose in this manner. What seemed to men to be defeat proved to be victory. What appeared to be rejection became the means of worldwide blessing. The wisdom of God is therefore displayed not merely in the certainty of His purpose, but in the marvelous manner in which He accomplishes it.

The mystery is not left suspended as an unresolved puzzle awaiting the verdict of history. Rather, it has been unveiled. God's covenant faithfulness has been vindicated. His dealings with Israel and the Gentiles have been shown to form one coherent purpose. Having traced that purpose from beginning to end, Paul can only confess that its wisdom is beyond the discovery of men and that all glory belongs to the Lord "of whom, and through whom, and to whom, are all things."

If Paul's principal point is simply that the Jews will experience a large-scale conversion after the completion of the Gentile mission, one may ask why that prediction, considered by itself, should evoke such an extended meditation upon the unsearchable wisdom of God. Certainly such an event would be a glorious display of divine grace. Yet Paul's emphasis is not merely upon the greatness of what God does, but upon the unfathomable wisdom of the manner in which He accomplishes His purpose. The doxology appears to reflect upon the remarkable way in which God has accomplished His purpose rather than upon a future event whose manner, timing, and scope remain undefined and unknown to Paul.

This observation does not by itself determine the interpretation of Romans 11. It does, however, provide an important confirmation of the conclusions reached above. Paul is not merely bringing his argument to a close; he is reflecting upon it. The doxology is therefore best understood as the climax of the argument developed throughout Romans 9–11.

6.4 Conclusions Drawn from the Romans 11 Exegesis

The verse-by-verse exegesis of Romans 11:1–32 leads to several important conclusions concerning Paul's argument. Throughout Romans 9–11:

- Paul never says that Israel's hardening will cease before the end of the age.
- Paul never introduces a distinct future phase of redemption centered upon the Jewish people.
- Paul never abandons the remnant principle established from the beginning of his argument in favor of a broader ethnic principle.
- Paul never postpones the fulfillment of God's promises to a later era, but continually demonstrates that God is fulfilling those promises to Israel in the present.

Herman Bavinck recognized one of the principal difficulties facing the futurist interpretation. He observed that if Romans 11:25–32 introduces a future national conversion of Israel, it contradicts the argument Paul has been developing throughout the preceding chapters:

*"If it were the apostle's intention to give in 11:25–32 a new, supplementary answer, he would bring his reasoning at the end into conflict with its beginning and point of departure."*⁷¹

Bavinck argued that Paul had already demonstrated in Romans 9:6 that God's promises had not failed because, he says, they were fulfilled in “the spiritual seed of Abraham,” a point he regarded as confirmed by the discussion of the present remnant in Romans 11:1–10. He then raised what he described as “weighty objections” to the view that Romans 11:25–32 introduces “a new, supplementary answer” in which “the promises of God... are then only completely realized when in the last time a national conversion of Israel takes place.” He therefore observed:

“In any case, in chap. 9:1–10:11 there is not a single word about such an expectation for the people of Israel, and there is not a single expression that suggests it and prepares for it. And chap. 11:11–24 also still contains nothing that points to such an expectation.”⁷²

Bavinck's observations are confirmed by the foregoing exegesis. It has shown that the future restoration interpretation rests not upon the natural flow of Paul's argument but upon a network of interpretive assumptions imported into Romans 11. The passage does not announce a transition from the apostolic age to the end of history, redefine “all Israel” as the future Jewish nation, or postpone the fulfillment of God's saving purpose to a distant era. The assumptions underlying the futurist interpretation may reinforce one another, but they are not established by the texts themselves. Once those assumptions are set aside, the entire exegetical foundation of the doctrine crumbles.

Rather, Paul consistently explains God's faithfulness by showing that God ordained Israel's partial hardening so that the Jews' rejection of the gospel would drive the apostles to proclaim the gospel among the Gentiles, among whom it was embraced in large numbers. Through the salvation of the Gentiles, in turn, He provokes the elect among the Jews to emulation so that they too come to faith in Christ. What appeared to be evidence that God's promises had failed—that is, the majority of the Jews rejecting the gospel—was in reality one of the principal means by which those promises were being fulfilled. In this way, all Israel was being saved—not through a future national conversion of the Jewish people, but through the salvation of the elect remnant according to grace.

In chapters 9, 10, and 11, Paul is responding to this question:

Has God been unfaithful in fulfilling His promises to Israel because the majority of the Jews have been left outside the church?

Paul's answer is not:

Do not think that God has been unfaithful in His promises to Israel, because those promises will be fulfilled in a great revival among the Jews living at some distant point in the future.

Paul's answer is:

Do not think that God has been unfaithful in His promises to Israel, because those promises were always meant only for the elect Jews whom God is now saving.

Jews and Gentiles alike stand condemned in unbelief, and Jews and Gentiles alike obtain mercy only through the same sovereign grace in the Savior. The salvation of the elect remnant of Israel together with the ingathering of the Gentiles during the apostolic age is not a parenthesis in God's plan; it is the fulfillment of it.

7. The Broader Witness of the New Testament Concerning a Future Conversion of the Jews

Any proposed understanding of Romans 11 must be consistent with the broader teaching of the New Testament. If Paul is predicting a mass conversion of the Jewish people, one would reasonably expect the same theme to appear elsewhere in the apostolic writings. The question, then, is whether the broader witness of the New Testament supports such an expectation or points in a different direction.

7.1 Christ and the Apostles Never Predict a Future Conversion of the Jews

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke of judgment upon unbelieving Israel and of the extension of God's kingdom to the Gentiles. Although He repeatedly foretold His return, the resurrection, and the consummation of all things, He gave no indication that He anticipated a national restoration of Israel in a later era. Instead, He pronounced judgment upon Jerusalem, foretold its desolation, and predicted the destruction of its temple, declaring that not one stone would be left upon another (Matthew 22:7; 23:37–39; 24; Mark 13; Luke 21). As He entered Jerusalem, He wept over the city (Luke 19:41–44). On the day following His triumphal entry, He cursed the fig tree, an act commonly understood to symbolize His judgment upon unbelieving Israel, declaring that no one would ever again eat fruit from it (Mark 11:12–14). On His way to the crucifixion, He instructed the women who mourned for Him to weep instead for Jerusalem (Luke 23:28).

At the same time, Jesus proclaimed that the salvation rejected by Israel would be extended to the Gentiles. The kingdom of God, He declared, would be taken from Israel and entrusted to a people who would produce its fruits (Matthew 21:43). The vineyard would be leased to other tenants (Matthew 21:41). Those originally invited to the wedding feast would be passed over, and others gathered from the highways would be brought in (Matthew 22:9). He foretold that many would come from east and west to recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, but the children of the kingdom would be cast out (Matthew 8:10–12). He announced that He had other sheep outside the Jewish fold who also must be gathered (John 10:16). When certain

Greeks sought an audience with Him, He interpreted their arrival as evidence that the hour had come for Him to die like a grain of wheat falling into the earth so that He might bear abundant fruit (John 12:24). Following His resurrection, He commissioned His disciples to carry the gospel to every nation (Matthew 28:18-20).

The apostles continued this same understanding of Israel's place in God's plan of salvation. Although they were to begin their ministry in Jerusalem, they were then to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Peter first proclaimed the gospel to the Jews (Acts 2:14; 3:19; 5:31), yet he also learned through divine revelation that no people were now to be regarded as ceremonially unclean and that everyone who fears the Lord is accepted by Him regardless of nationality (Acts 10:28, 34-35). Paul likewise consistently preached first in the synagogues, but whenever the Jews rejected the gospel, he turned to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46; 18:6; 28:25-28). His settled principle was, "to the Jew first, and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

Paul teaches that Jews and Gentiles alike stand condemned before God and require the same salvation through the gospel (Romans 3:19-30). There is only one way of justification—faith—the very principle by which Abraham himself was counted righteous before the giving of the law (Romans 4; Galatians 3). Those Jews who reject the Lord Jesus Christ are not the true circumcision or the genuine Israel (Romans 2:28-29). Rather they are the false circumcision (Philippians 3:2). They are rebellious, empty talkers, and deceivers whose mouths must be silenced (Titus 1:10-11). They put the Lord Jesus and the prophets to death, persecute believers, oppose God's saving purpose, hinder the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles, and continually heap up their sins until divine wrath comes upon them (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16). Likewise, those who opposed the church in Smyrna claimed to be Jews, yet Jesus declared that they were not, but rather a synagogue of Satan (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). The true descendants of Abraham are those who belong to Christ through faith (Romans 9:8; Galatians 3:29).

In summary, Christ announced the judgment and rejection of unbelieving Israel, declared that the kingdom was to be taken from them and given to others, and proclaimed the gathering of one covenant people through faith in Himself. The apostles proclaimed the fulfillment of God's purposes through the gospel and nowhere directed the Church to expect the future renewal of the nation that Jesus had condemned. Given that this is the uniform testimony of the New Testament, and there is no explicit prediction in Romans 11 of a national restoration of Israel, on what basis is the chapter interpreted as teaching one?⁷³

7.2 The Apostolic Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy Never Predicts a Future Conversion of the Jews

Even more significant than the absence of explicit predictions concerning a national restoration of Israel is the manner in which the New Testament itself explains the fulfillment of God's promises.

As demonstrated earlier in the article, the apostles consistently interpret the Old Testament promises in relation to Christ, the salvation of the Jewish remnant, and the gathering of the Gentiles into one covenant people. The promises made to Abraham are fulfilled in Christ, the promised Seed, and in those who belong to Him by faith (Galatians 3:16, 26–29). The inheritance is extended to all who are united to Christ, whether Jew or Gentile (Romans 4:13–16; Galatians 3:28–29). James applies Amos' prophecy concerning the rebuilding of David's fallen tabernacle to God's present work of gathering the Gentiles through the gospel (Acts 15:14–18). Likewise, the blessings of the new covenant promised through Jeremiah are presented as blessings already inaugurated through the mediatorial work of Christ (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 8:6–13; Hebrews 9:15; Hebrews 10:14–18). These representative examples illustrate a consistent apostolic hermeneutic: the Old Testament promises are understood as finding their fulfillment in the saving work of the Lord Jesus and the formation of His covenant people, not in the future renewal of Israel as a distinct covenant nation.

Those who insist that Romans 11 predicts a large-scale conversion of the Jews in the latter days must demonstrate that the apostles themselves interpret the Old Testament restoration prophecies as predicting it. This is a burden they cannot bear.

7.3 The New Testament's Future Hope Does Not Include a Future Conversion of the Jews

When the apostles speak explicitly about the future, what events do they direct believers to anticipate?

The New Testament speaks frequently and plainly about the future. Rather than directing believers to anticipate a restoration of Israel, Christ and His apostles repeatedly point them to the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, the consummation of the kingdom, the destruction of God's enemies, and the new heavens and new earth.

Jesus spoke repeatedly of His coming in glory and of the final separation of the righteous and the wicked (Matthew 13:24–30, 36–43; Matthew 25:31–46). Paul devoted extended discussion to the resurrection and the return of Christ (1 Corinthians 15:20–58; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; 2 Thessalonians 1:7–10). Peter emphasized the coming day of the Lord and the renewal of creation (2 Peter 3:10–13). John concluded the canon with the final triumph of Christ, the great judgment, and the everlasting blessedness of His people (Revelation 19:11–21; Revelation 20:11–15; Revelation 21:1–7; Revelation 22:1–5). Throughout the New Testament, believers are directed to these profound realities that still await fulfillment.

Against this background, one fact is striking. Apart from the disputed interpretation of Romans 11 itself, nowhere does Jesus or His apostles present a national conversion of the Jewish people as an object of Christian hope. Those who insist that Romans 11 predicts such an event must explain why Christ and His apostles never include it among the great future realities held before the church.

8. The First-Century Destruction of National Israel and Ingrafting of the Jewish Remnant

If the interpretation advanced in the preceding sections is correct, the New Testament Scriptures should speak of the salvation of large numbers of Gentiles together with the continued ingathering of the Jewish remnant described in Romans 11. They do repeatedly.

Paul, referring to the Jews, explicitly states that “even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace” (Romans 11:5). From the outset, the New Testament presents the gospel advancing within Israel and producing large numbers of Jewish converts even while the majority of the nation remains in unbelief, with these Jewish Christians being incorporated together with Gentile believers into the one Church of Christ.

Christ’s own ministry was directed primarily toward Israel. He declared that he was sent “unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24), preached regularly in the synagogues, and performed his works among that people. His selection of twelve apostles, corresponding to the twelve tribes, reflects the same orientation. Yet even during his ministry, the pattern of division is evident: many reject him, while others believe (John 1:11–12).

After the resurrection, this same pattern continues with greater clarity and scale. On the day of Pentecost, about three thousand were converted (Acts 2:41), followed shortly afterward by another five thousand (Acts 4:4). The number of disciples in Jerusalem continued to increase rapidly, and we are told that “a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith” (Acts 6:7). When Paul later returned to Jerusalem, he was informed that there were “many thousands of Jews which believe” (Acts 21:20). The Greek term *μυριάδες*, used in this verse, denotes *tens of thousands* and indicates that the number of Jewish believers was already very large.

These conversions are not merely preparatory to some later fulfillment. They correspond directly to the language of Romans 11. They correspond directly to the language of Romans 11. The “receiving” of Israel (11:15) is seen in the large-scale apostolic ingathering of Jewish believers into the Church. The “fulness” (πλήρωμα) of Israel (11:12), understood as an abundant ingathering rather than a totality, is reflected in the remarkable number of Jewish conversions occurring during the apostolic age. Each instance of Jewish faith represents the grafting in again of natural branches who “abide not still in unbelief” (11:23).

Nevertheless, the broader condition of the nation remains one of hardening. Opposition to the gospel is widespread, both in Judea and throughout the diaspora. The pattern described by Paul—“the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Romans 11:7)—is visible throughout the narrative of Acts. The presence of tens of thousands of believing Jews does not eliminate this division; it confirms it.

Nor is this ingrafting confined to Jerusalem. As the gospel spreads outward, the apostles consistently begin their work in Jewish synagogues. In Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Thessalonica, Berea, and elsewhere, Jews believe in significant numbers (Acts 13:43; 14:1; 17:4, 12). Even where opposition arises, a portion responds in faith. The pattern remains consistent: within a largely unbelieving nation, a substantial remnant is gathered.

Paul himself describes this pattern as the purpose of his ministry: “that I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them” (Romans 11:14). Acts repeatedly records that ministry in action.

When it is remembered that it was the Jewish nation which had rejected Christ, demanded His crucifixion, and afterward largely opposed the apostolic proclamation of the gospel and persecuted believers, the scale of the mercy and grace of God displayed in the apostolic ingathering becomes even more remarkable.

John Lightfoot observed of the first-century Jews:

*“They had sinned worse than the heathen; the prophets blame them so. For besides the contempt of means, which the heathen had not, they outdid them in the very sin that cast the heathen off. The Gentiles had refused the ‘invisible creator’ but they had only small light. These had rejected God visible, and that for a murderer, when the light shone as clear as possible; as plainly as God could converse with men and show himself, i.e., in infinite goodness and holiness.”*⁷⁴

Yet despite this unparalleled act of national rejection, the apostolic ingathering of the Jewish remnant continued on a remarkable scale, precisely as Paul describes in Romans 11 and in harmony with the remnant principle that governs his argument throughout Romans 9–11.

If comparable percentages of people were suddenly converted to Christ within a modern nation today, such events would immediately be recognized by Christians as a remarkable spiritual awakening. Yet because many interpreters approach Romans 11 expecting a prophecy of an even larger conversion event, the tremendous significance of the apostolic ingathering is often minimized, as though the conversion of tens of thousands of Jews in the apostolic age was somehow insufficient to constitute the fulfillment Paul describes.

When these remarkable events are allowed to speak for themselves apart from futurist assumptions, the question becomes not, “When is God going to fulfill His promises to the Jews?” but, “When are Christians going to recognize the immense mercy and grace already shown to the Jews in the apostolic age?”

The subsequent course of Jewish history is equally significant.

The scale of the judgments that befell the Jewish nation in the generations following Christ's ministry is difficult to overstate. Ancient historians record repeated massacres, wars, and devastations extending from the decades immediately preceding the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 through the major Jewish revolts of the second century. The first-century Jewish historian Flavius Josephus alone records approximately 20,000 slain during disturbances under the Roman procurator of Judaea, Ventidius Cumanus, as well as 20,000 deaths at Caesarea, 13,000 at Scythopolis, more than 20,000 at Ascalon in two separate events, 50,000 at Alexandria, more than 40,000 at Jotapata, about 9,000 at Gamala, and numerous additional losses throughout Judea and the Roman world during the years leading up to and during the Jewish War of A.D. 66–73. He further reports that approximately 1,100,000 perished in connection with the destruction of Jerusalem and that 97,000 were taken captive.

For the Jewish uprisings under the Roman emperor Trajan (A.D. 115–117), James Calvert cites ancient sources reporting that Jewish rebels killed approximately 220,000 inhabitants of Cyrene and more than 240,000 persons in Egypt and Cyprus before suffering devastating Roman reprisals. He also cites numerous historical authorities concerning the Bar Kokhba revolt under the emperor Hadrian (A.D. 132–135), describing immense Jewish losses, including reports of approximately 500,000 deaths at Bethar alone. Although the precise figures reported by these sources are frequently debated, the overall picture is unmistakable: the casualty estimates preserved by the ancient historians amount to well over two million deaths, and within little more than a century of Christ's ministry the Jewish nation endured a succession of catastrophes of extraordinary magnitude that decimated its population and shattered its national cohesion.⁷⁵

Meanwhile, the believing remnant was being incorporated into the one body of Christ alongside Gentile believers. As English Puritan theologian Richard Baxter (1615–1691) observed, the converted Jews “fell into the Catholic Church, and married with Gentile Christians, and so ere long lost the name of Jews and became unknown.”⁷⁶

Calvert likewise argued that converted Jews in the post-apostolic period did not continue as a separate covenant people distinct from Gentile believers, but were progressively absorbed into the wider body of the Church. Describing the apostolic era, he speaks of “Jews and Gentiles being called together and united into one body,” and, after the destruction of Jerusalem under Titus (A.D. 70) and the suppression of the Bar Kokhba revolt under Hadrian (A.D. 132–135), of their being “joined into one with the Gentile Christians.” He rejects the notion that converted Jews would remain “a distinct and conspicuous people, constituting a kingdom and commonwealth separated from all others.”⁷⁷

Although Jewish conversions continued after the apostolic age, the historical record never again exhibits the large-scale ingathering that characterizes the book of Acts. For

nearly two thousand years, the overwhelming majority of Jews have remained in unbelief concerning Christ while only a small remnant has believed.

The history of the Church confirms the pattern Paul describes in Romans 11. The elect remnant was gathered from within Israel while the nation as a whole remained in unbelief, believing Jews were incorporated together with Gentile believers into the one people of God, and the old covenant nation disappeared from the stage of history under the judgments of the Lord. National Israel belongs to the past, not to the future. From that point onward, the history of redemption is the history of Christ's one Church, in which there is neither Jew nor Gentile, but one people united in the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

9. The Continued Existence of the Jewish People Is Not Evidence for Their Future Restoration

One argument frequently advanced in support of the future restoration view appeals to the continued existence of the Jewish people throughout history. It is often argued that if God did not intend one day to restore Israel nationally, there would be no apparent reason for the preservation of a people identified as Jewish over so many centuries. Why, it is asked, has this community continued to exist while many ancient peoples and civilizations have passed from the stage of history?

This reasoning influenced the nineteenth-century Church. Convinced that Romans 11 foretold a future national conversion of the Jewish people, Robert Murray M'Cheyne and others undertook a mission of inquiry to Palestine in 1839 under the auspices of the Church of Scotland. The resulting report, which identified Jewish communities believed to be suitable for evangelizing, helped inspire one of the most sustained Protestant missionary enterprises directed toward the Jews. Yet despite decades of labor, considerable financial support, and the dedication of numerous missionaries, the enterprise proved almost entirely fruitless, producing only a negligible number of professed converts, some of whom were of doubtful sincerity. Nor was M'Cheyne's mission unique. Over the following two centuries, other Protestant churches and missionary societies undertook efforts to evangelize the Jewish people based on the same belief. These efforts produced few converts. Nevertheless, adherents of the futurist interpretation of Romans 11 continued to believe that the existence of Jewish communities was evidence in itself that the Lord had preserved them for a future national conversion. Over time, this conviction became deeply ingrained in evangelical prophetic thought.

Yet the historical influence of this belief does not establish that it is biblically or logically sound. Several observations may therefore be made in response.

First, the argument assumes that the modern Jewish population can be identified with confidence as the physical descendants of the Israel spoken of in Scripture. This assumption is far more dubious than is often acknowledged. The destruction of the

genealogical records, the disappearance of tribal distinctions, and nearly two thousand years of migrations, dispersions, conversions, intermarriages, and population movements make such claims exceedingly difficult to establish. Whatever historical continuity may exist between modern Jewish communities and ancient Israel, there is no reliable means of demonstrating genealogical descent from the biblical nation. The question is therefore far more complex than futurist arguments often assume.

More importantly, even if one grants a substantial historical continuity between modern Jews and ancient Israelites, the conclusion still does not follow. The question is not whether God has providentially preserved a people identified as Jewish, but whether the Bible teaches that such preservation was intended to culminate in a national conversion. The mere survival of the Jewish people does not, by itself, establish such a conclusion.

Commenting on Romans 11:25, Lenski observed the curious phenomenon of the continued preservation of the Jewish people, but did not regard it as implying a future national restoration:

“The Jews will not disappear as one might think. Other nations have disappeared... They will endure until the last Gentile is brought into the kingdom and the Lord returns for the great judgment. Yea, they will endure—strange to say!—to the very end just as Paul and the Romans saw them at their time, petrified in unbelief, but ever only in part and never as a whole, and so, with this situation prevailing, with a part ever being reached by God's grace despite the petrification of the rest, all God's true Israel, all of it that really deserves the name, will be saved. The world has never known a phenomenon comparable to this.”⁷⁸

Lenski's point is clear. Unlike many ancient peoples who gradually disappeared into history, the Jews have continued to exist as a distinct people throughout the centuries. Why has God preserved them in this manner?

The answer may lie in the judgments pronounced upon Israel in the Old Testament. The covenant curses warned not only that Israel would be judged and scattered among the nations, but that the nation would become a public testimony to that judgment.

Moses warned:

“And thou shalt become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword, among all nations whither the LORD shall lead thee.” (Deuteronomy 28:37)

He further declared:

“And among these nations shalt thou find no ease, neither shall the sole of thy foot have rest.” (Deuteronomy 28:65)

Likewise, God warned concerning Israel:

“And this house, which is high, shall be an astonishment to every one that passeth by it; so that he shall say, Why hath the LORD done thus unto this land, and to this house?” (1 Kings 9:8)

Jeremiah employed similar language:

“And I will make this city desolate, and an hissing; every one that passeth thereby shall be astonished and hiss because of all the plagues thereof.” (Jeremiah 19:8)

And again:

“And I will deliver them to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth for their hurt, to be a reproach and a proverb, a taunt and a curse, in all places whither I shall drive them.” (Jeremiah 24:9)

Although these warnings were first fulfilled in earlier covenant judgments upon Israel and Judah, the Jews of Christ's generation likewise came under the same covenant curses. The destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent dispersion gave renewed expression to these long-standing covenant sanctions.

Nor does the New Testament speak of unbelieving Israel as though these judgments had become irrelevant in the Christian era. On the contrary, Paul repeatedly describes the nation as remaining under God's judicial judgment. Quoting the Psalms, he writes:

“Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see, and bow down their back alway.” (Romans 11:10)

Likewise, at the close of the book of Acts, Paul applies Isaiah's prophecy of judicial blindness to the Jews of his own day:

“Well spake the Holy Ghost by Esaias the prophet unto our fathers, Saying, Go unto this people, and say, Hearing ye shall hear, and shall not understand; and seeing ye shall see, and not perceive: For the heart of this people is waxed gross...” (Acts 28:25–27)

Elsewhere, speaking of those Jews who opposed the gospel, he declares that God's wrath has been fully poured out upon them:

“Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost.” (1 Thessalonians 2:16)

The condition described by Paul is not merely a temporary historical setback. It is a divine judgment. The unbelieving nation stands under the very hardening, blindness, and condemnation that the Holy Scriptures had long foretold.

James Coffman suggested that the continued existence of the Jewish people, rather than their complete destruction, may itself be part of the fulfillment of these

judgments. Rather than blotting the nation from history, God has preserved it as a continuing testimony to the truth of His warnings and as a perpetual example of the consequences of rejecting Him:

“Israel's hardening in part (the part hardened being the fleshly Israel) was made, through God's commutation of their sentence, to be a perpetual thing. Far from perishing, the nation would stand in ceaseless petrification throughout the long ages of Gentile acceptance of the gospel, frozen and hardened against the God of their noble ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, a gaunt and terrible witness unto all ages of the absolute truth of every word of their sacred Old Testament, and also of the indisputable verity of the New Testament and all that is revealed there of the Lord Jesus Christ. The nation stands, a stark and awesome monument of God's displeasure vented upon them throughout history in the dispersions and persecutions that have dogged their steps all over the world.”⁷⁹

Coffman thus understood the continued existence of the Jewish people as evidence of continuing judgment rather than of a future national restoration.

Among the most influential Christian thinkers of the seventeenth century was Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician, philosopher, and apologist. Pascal likewise viewed the continued existence of the Jewish people as a phenomenon requiring explanation. Contrasting the Babylonian captivity with the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, he wrote that the latter was “without promise of restoration, without prophets, without kings, without consolation, without hope.” He further observed:

“It is a wonderful thing, and worthy of particular attention, to see this Jewish people existing so many years in perpetual misery, it being necessary as a proof of Jesus Christ both that they should exist to prove Him and that they should be miserable because they crucified Him; and though to be miserable and to exist are contradictory, they nevertheless still exist in spite of their misery.”⁸⁰

Rather than viewing the preservation of the Jewish people as evidence of God's favor toward them, Pascal drew attention to the remarkable combination of their continued existence and their afflicted condition. Together these served, in his view, as a testimony to the truth of Christianity and to the consequences of Israel's rejection of Christ.

If Pascal and Coffman are correct, then the preservation of a distinct Jewish people does not point forward to a national restoration; it points backward to the judgments foretold in the Bible and to their continuing fulfillment before the eyes of the world. Their continued existence serves as a solemn testimony to the truth of God's warnings and the fearful consequences of unbelief. They are preserved not as the objects of a special national favor awaiting future realization, but as a witness to the judicial hardening and judgment described by Paul in Romans 11.

10. Historical Christian Witnesses Against a Future Restoration of the Jews

The preceding sections have argued that the promises concerning Israel find their fulfillment in Christ and His Church and are most naturally understood without a distinct conversion of the Jewish people as a historical event. Throughout the discussion, numerous Christian writers who agree with the interpretation defended in this article have already been quoted in support of particular arguments. These include Dutch writer Hugo Grotius; Puritan writers John Lightfoot, Richard Baxter, and James Calvert; Anglican writer Henry Hammond; Reformed writers Herman Bavinck, Louis Berkhof, William Hendriksen, Herman Ridderbos, and O. Palmer Robertson; Lutheran writers R. C. H. Lenski, Ole Hallesby, Sigurd Odlund, and Elling Hove; and American writers James B. Coffman and R. L. Whiteside. The present section supplements that evidence. These witnesses demonstrate collectively that the interpretation defended in this article has long been represented within the Christian Church.

Particularly noteworthy in this regard is the extended discussion found in Book II, Chapter IV of James Calvert's *Naphtali* (c. 1672), where he surveys and interacts with a range of interpretations concerning Romans 11, the Old Testament prophecies about the restoration of national Israel, and the historical condition of the Jews during and after the apostolic age.

Calvert's treatment of the controversy is distinguished by its fairness and intellectual independence. Although he held the distinguished Dutch Reformed theologian Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676) in the highest esteem, referring to him as “the most illustrious Voetius,” he nevertheless concluded that, on this question, Voetius had dealt “rather too harshly” with Hugo Grotius in opposing the interpretation that Romans 11 had found its fulfillment in the apostolic age rather than in a future conversion of the Jews. After carefully weighing the competing interpretations, he concluded that the Grotius–Hammond interpretation was more probable than not and proceeded to defend it through an extended exegetical and historical argument.⁸¹

The strength of Calvert's argument lies not merely in its conclusions but in the breadth of the evidence he marshals in their support. Throughout the chapter he appeals to Jewish historians, early church fathers, Reformation commentators, and contemporary Protestant scholars in an effort to demonstrate that the fulfillment of Romans 11 belonged to the apostolic age rather than to a distant future.⁸²

Calvert argued that the Old Testament restoration promises required no further national fulfillment beyond what had already taken place in history. In his view, the decisive transition occurred with the passing of the Jewish commonwealth and the establishment of Christ's kingdom among all nations. As he writes, “Where Moses ends, there Christ begins; where the Jewish world ends, there the Christian world begins; where Moses ceases to reign over Judea alone, there Christ begins to reign throughout the whole world.” Accordingly, he maintained that “the kingdom of God is

transferred from the Jews to the Gentiles, the covenant of peculiarity having been broken, so that it belongs equally to all peoples by a common right.”⁸³

Throughout *Naphtali*, Calvert quotes numerous early theologians and cites a wide range of historical sources.

Hegesippus, a second-century Jewish-Christian writer frequently cited by early church historians, writes that after the unbelieving Jews “were exterminated from the Promised Land and perished,” “the remnant of Israel might be saved, so that from the two walls one Church of the Resurrection might be built upon that cornerstone (who shall make both one), our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸⁴

Origen, the influential third-century Christian theologian and biblical scholar, writes of the Jews in his reply to Celsus: “We confidently affirm that they shall not be restored.”⁸⁵

In the fourth Dialogue traditionally attributed to the fourth-century Cappadocian church father Gregory Nazianzen, it is stated: “Never was there persuasion that the Jews would be restored, nor does the Apostle teach any such thing in those words rightly and truly handed down by him, though afterward misunderstood and wrongly applied by others.”⁸⁶

John Chrysostom, the renowned fourth-century preacher and Archbishop of Constantinople, similarly states that the Jewish servitude “shall endure unto the end of the world.”⁸⁷

Jerome, the fourth- and early fifth-century biblical scholar and translator of the Latin Vulgate, commenting on Isaiah 1:6, describes the calamity inflicted upon the Jews by the Romans as “the eternal captivity.” Elsewhere he writes that after the captivities under Vespasian, Titus, and Hadrian, “the ruins of Jerusalem shall remain unto the consummation of the age.” Taken in the context of his accompanying remarks, Jerome’s point is that the desolation brought about by the Roman destructions would continue and that the old Jewish commonwealth would not be restored.⁸⁸

Elsewhere Calvert observes that Augustine, Jerome, Theodoret, Calvin, and Hyperius all understood “all Israel shall be saved” to refer to the Israel of God, that is, the community of God’s elect people rather than the Jewish nation considered simply according to the flesh. Theodoret’s surviving commentary on Zechariah 13:8–9 is especially significant, for there he interprets the promised remnant as the believing Jews gathered into Christ during the apostolic age rather than as a national restoration at a much later date. Commenting on Zechariah 13:8–9, he writes:

“He says these things concerning those of the Jews who have believed. For in addition to the twelve apostles, he also chose another seventy; and after the resurrection, one hundred and twenty were found to be together. And the divine Paul said that he was seen by five hundred gathered together. And the most divine Peter, having preached, now brought three thousand, and now five

thousand into the net of life. And the great James says to the blessed Paul: "You see, brother, how many thousands there are of the Jews who have believed." ...God also says through another prophet: "Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved.""⁸⁹

Calvert appeals to theologians drawn from widely differing eras, regions, and confessional traditions: Lucas Brugensis, the sixteenth-century Catholic exegete; John Chrysostom, the fourth-century Archbishop of Constantinople; Euthymius Zigabenus, the Byzantine biblical commentator; Franciscus Zegerus, the Jesuit exegete; and Johannes Piscator, the Reformed theologian and commentator. Commenting on Luke 21:24, he cites each of them as interpreting Christ's words, "Jerusalem shall be trodden down of the Gentiles," as describing a condition that would continue "unto the very end of the present world."⁹⁰

Addressing the assertion that the Jewish nation will be restored through faith in Christ, Calvert counters by asserting that only the remnant is saved and no Jewish distinctiveness remains:

*"Indeed the remnants are saved through faith in Christ, not for the restoration of Judaism but for the establishment of Christianity. In Christ they indeed possess root and branch, namely the same root common to all other believers; but no peculiar, Gentile-distinct, or legal root."*⁹¹

Naphtali has Westminster Assemblyman John Lightfoot arguing that the covenant of Jewish peculiarity was broken when Christ "gathered His flock from among every people."⁹²

Calvert himself then presses this point of Jewish particularity directly against those advocating for a future restoration of the Jewish people:

*"Let them say by the power of which covenant this is to occur. If by grace, that covenant distinguishes neither Jew nor Greek, nor acknowledges anyone according to the flesh. If by the covenant of peculiarity, that covenant was broken when He gathered His flock from among every people."*⁹³

Henry Hammond, noted for his extensive knowledge of the writings and history of the early church, is cited several times in *Naphtali*. He, like Calvert, argues that believing Jews who embraced Christ did so "not as Jews, but as Christians," and states that after the Jewish wars they "were united into one Church together with believing Gentiles, whereas until that time they had formed separate assemblies."⁹⁴

Hammond, in his own published commentary, rejects the view that Romans 11 predicts a latter-day national conversion:

*"That this should now still belong to any (yet future) return of the Jews in a visible remarkable manner, is no way necessary, the circumstances of the context applying it to those first times wherein the Epistle was written"*⁹⁵

Hammond then strengthens his case by appealing to several early Christian writers who, he argues, understood the judgments that befell the Jewish nation as permanent and rejected the expectation of a future restoration. He cites Origen, Chrysostom, Caesarius, Jerome, and others in support of this conclusion.⁹⁶

One of the clearest formulations of the distinction between the salvation of individual Jews and the restoration of the Jewish nation as a distinct covenantal people is found in the Latin work *Dialogus de Principio et Praxi Theologiae Moderatae* (“Dialogue on the Principle and Practice of Moderate Theology”), the author of which is not named in Calvert’s book. In the course of his discussion of Romans 11, Calvert cites the following statement from this work:

*“The Apostle does not say that unbelieving Jews are altogether rejected from all hope of salvation, but only that for this cause God by an irrevocable decree has cast them off so that they are no longer a nation. Nor is it asserted that the conversion of particular persons is absolutely impossible; but all that can be proved from his words is this: that the rejection of the Jewish nation, insofar as they are no longer a distinct nation or political body, is immutable.”*⁹⁷

Richard Baxter, in *The Glorious Kingdom of Christ* (1691), argued that even if large numbers of Jews were converted they would soon lose their separate identity as the early Jewish believers did:

*“Were our Jews converted, they would in less than a hundred years be no longer a Jewish nation: for their state of peculiarity with the Mosaical policy is abolished by Christ, and must never be restored: and they must and would marry with Gentile Christians, and fall into the catholic church as rivers into the sea, and lose the name of Jews: so did their converted predecessors.”*⁹⁸

Some interpreters have understood “all Israel” in Romans 11:26 as referring to the totality of the elect people of God, Jew and Gentile together, in keeping with Paul’s broader teaching that all who are of faith are the children of Abraham (Galatians 3:7, 29). John Calvin interpreted the passage in this broader sense, extending “Israel” to “all the people of God,” or “the whole Israel of God,” drawn from both Jews and Gentiles.⁹⁹ While this article understands the phrase more particularly in terms of the elect remnant within Israel during the apostolic age and immediately after, Calvin’s interpretation nevertheless demonstrates that even among major Reformed expositors the passage was not universally understood as predicting a national restoration of ethnic Israel.

Advocates of a future conversion of the Jews have often acknowledged that the contrary view has a long history.

English Baptist commentator Samuel Clark (1684-1750) observed:

*“As to the conversion of the Jews, it has indeed been the opinion of many learned men, that nothing more is to be expected, than what has already been done in the several, but especially the first ages of Christianity...”*¹⁰⁰

Similar testimony appears in the nineteenth century. As noted earlier, Presbyterian expositor Charles Hodge acknowledged that the non-futurist interpretation of Romans 11 was held, in various forms, by “the great body of the authors who lived about the time of the Reformation.”¹⁰¹ Likewise, German Lutheran exegete Hermann Olshausen (1796–1839) acknowledged that “the Reformers especially ” interpreted Romans 11 as referring to spiritual Israel rather than a future national conversion of the Jews.¹⁰²

Olshausen's remarks are noteworthy for another reason. In tracing the history of interpretation, he did not limit this understanding to the Reformers. He also identified Chrysostom, Theodoret, and Jerome among those who interpreted Paul's words with reference to spiritual Israel rather than to ethnic Jews as a nation. Thus, in Olshausen's estimation, the roots of this interpretation extended back beyond the Reformation and into the early centuries of the church.

The same recognition persisted into the twentieth century. Martyn Lloyd-Jones acknowledged that Augustine, Calvin, and Luther interpreted “all Israel” as referring to the totality of God's elect people, Jews and Gentiles together. He further noted that prominent theologians Johann Bengel, Herman Bavinck, Ole Hallesby, and Richard Lenski understood “all Israel” as the aggregate of all elect Jews saved throughout history.¹⁰³

Although Clark, Hodge, Olshausen, and Lloyd-Jones all held the futurist view, their testimony shows that non-futurist interpretations were well established among influential Christian interpreters long before the modern period.

Their collective testimony demonstrates that the non-futurist position is neither novel nor historically marginal, but forms part of a longstanding stream of Christian exegesis extending through many generations of the Church. The significance of the historical evidence presented in this section lies not merely in the conclusions these men reached, but in the fact that they reached them across different centuries and theological contexts.

The truth of this interpretation, however, does not rest upon the number or stature of those who have held it. Its validity depends entirely upon the correct understanding of Scripture, and the preceding sections have shown both the strong biblical support for this interpretation and the corresponding weakness of the futurist reading. Christian doctrine must always be determined by sound exegesis of the inspired text, not by historical consensus. The testimony of these historical witnesses is valuable, not because it establishes the truth of the interpretation, but because it demonstrates that the exegetical conclusions defended in this article have been reached repeatedly by careful students of the Bible throughout the history of the Church.

11. The Negative Consequences of the Futurist Interpretation

The preceding sections have shown that Romans 11 does not predict a future conversion of the Jewish people but rather describes the salvation of the elect remnant within Israel during the apostolic age. The implications of this extend beyond the interpretation of a single chapter. As is often the case with erroneous doctrines, the futurist interpretation is not without practical consequences. It has exercised considerable influence upon modern Christian thought, affecting not only biblical interpretation but also attitudes toward the Jews, contemporary political questions, and the understanding of the relationship between the Church and Israel.

11.1 The Futurist Interpretation Encourages Special Treatment of Ethnic Jews

By teaching that the Jewish people continue to occupy a distinct place as the objects of unfulfilled covenant promises leading to a national restoration, the futurist interpretation encourages many Christians to regard them as standing in a favored category among unbelieving peoples. The result is often a reluctance to hold Jews to equitable standards and a refusal to acknowledge their anti-Christian tendencies with candor. While it is certainly possible for adherents of the futurist view to remain objective in their judgments concerning Jewish opposition to Christianity and the proper response to it, in practice this is often not the case. Instead, the doctrine tends not only to foster an inappropriate leniency toward the Jews arising from the belief that the Lord continues to regard them with a special favor, but also to persuade Christians that they are under a religious obligation to support the Jewish people in a manner that is not extended to other unbelievers.

One historical example of this tendency is found in the movement for the readmission of the Jews to England during the seventeenth century. As Lawrence J. Rabone explains in *Eschatology and the Readmission of the Jews to England*, the influential English theologian William Perkins (1558–1602) interpreted Romans 11 as foretelling the future conversion of the Jewish people, a view later embraced by prominent Puritans such as John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, and Philip Nye. Rabone further shows that Goodwin, Nye, and others brought these convictions into the deliberations of the Whitehall Conference of 1655, convened by England's head of state, Oliver Cromwell, to consider the proposal of the Jewish leader Menasseh ben Israel that the Jews be readmitted to England. As he observes, Goodwin and Owen regarded the readmission of the Jews as “a step which if she facilitated it would write England into the purposes of God, and bring her divine favour.”¹⁰⁴ In this way, a particular understanding of biblical prophecy, including the belief that the restoration of the Jewish people is foretold in Romans 11, became one of the main theological arguments that ultimately contributed to a change in government policy, ending the exclusion of the Jews from England after more than 350 years.

The influence of this interpretation has not been confined to seventeenth-century England. It has also significantly influenced modern American attitudes toward the Jews and their Zionist state in the Middle East. Prominent evangelical leaders such as John Hagee and Mike Huckabee have appealed to prophetic expectations concerning the Jewish people, including interpretations of Romans 11 that anticipate a restoration of Israel, in support of political and diplomatic support for the Jewish state. Organizations such as Christians United for Israel have raised vast sums of money, and millions of evangelical Christian voters have been encouraged to support particular candidates, policies, and foreign-policy initiatives on the basis of these beliefs. While the motivations of those involved are varied, the underlying principle is similar: ethnic Jews are regarded as occupying a unique place in God's prophetic program that warrants special treatment distinct from that afforded to other unbelieving peoples.

This perspective is frequently encountered in commentaries on the epistle to the Romans. For example, when explaining the hardening (or blinding) of the Jews described in Romans 11 from the perspective of the futurist belief, Baptist commentator William G. Williams (1822-1902) wrote:

*"...above all it does not cancel, in God's sight, their original consecration to him as 'holy.' Though they are under his displeasure, he still regards them as 'his people.'"*¹⁰⁵

To speak of the Jews in this manner is necessarily to regard them as occupying a uniquely favored position before God despite their hatred of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not difficult to see how this understanding would encourage a much more sympathetic disposition toward the Jews than would exist apart from the belief that a national restoration is destined for them.

A natural consequence of this teaching has been that Jewish opposition to Christianity is frequently excused or ignored. In many instances, individuals and movements openly hostile to both the Christian religion and Christian civilization are not merely tolerated but actively defended by Christians who have come to regard opposition to Jewish interests as incompatible with God's continuing favor toward the Jews. The implications extend far beyond biblical interpretation.

One of the most serious practical consequences of the futurist interpretation is that it distorts Christian moral judgment concerning the modern Jewish state in the Middle East. By its use of the label "Israel," many Christians acting upon the assumptions of the futurist doctrine have been persuaded that this country occupies a unique place in God's prophetic program, and so they either judge its conduct by standards different from those they apply to other nations or withhold moral judgment altogether. Actions that would ordinarily be condemned have often been defended, excused, or ignored simply because they were committed by a nation believed to still enjoy a special relationship with God. In this way, an erroneous interpretation of Romans 11 has fostered a double standard in Christian moral judgment, excusing conduct, on the basis of theological assumptions, that would never be tolerated in other nations.

11.2 The Futurist Interpretation Reintroduces an Abolished Distinction Between Jew and Gentile

A further concern is that the futurist doctrine tends to perpetuate a distinction between Jew and Gentile that the New Testament repeatedly declares to have been abolished in Christ. Throughout the apostolic writings, the emphasis falls upon the unity of God's people and upon faith in the Lord Jesus rather than ethnic identity.

Paul has already declared that “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Romans 9:6), and throughout Romans 9–11 he repeatedly distinguishes between Israel according to the flesh and the elect within Israel. Membership in the people of God is determined not by ancestry but by divine calling and faith in Christ. Likewise, Paul teaches that in Christ the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile has been broken down and that both are reconciled unto God in one body (Ephesians 2:14–16). The blessings of Abraham belong to those who are united to Christ by faith (Galatians 3:29), while true circumcision is defined spiritually rather than ethnically (Philippians 3:3). The apostolic emphasis rests upon present union with Christ rather than upon future blessings attached to ethnic descent.

Christ “hath made both one” and “hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us” (Ephesians 2:14). In Him there is “neither Jew nor Greek” (Galatians 3:28), for all who belong to Christ are equally Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. The olive tree of Romans 11 likewise depicts a single covenant people standing upon a single principle of inclusion: faith. Yet the futurist view reintroduces a distinction that Paul is at pains to remove. By assigning to ethnic Israel a unique prophetic destiny not shared by other peoples, it encourages Christians to think of the Jewish people as occupying a separate category within God's plan of redemption. The result is a theological and practical dualism in which ethnic distinctions continue to function as categories of special privilege long after the New Testament has declared that access to God's promises is determined not by descent but by union with Christ.

This theological distinction does not remain merely theoretical. If ethnic Israel is assigned a unique prophetic status and future national preference, it becomes difficult in practice to regard Jewish unbelief in precisely the same manner as the unbelief of other peoples. The tendency is not inherent in every adherent of the doctrine, but it flows naturally from a system that continues to assign theological significance to a Jew-Gentile distinction which the New Testament consistently subordinates to the higher reality of the one people of God in Christ.

The belief also tends to encourage Jewish self-exaltation. If Jews are told that they continue to occupy a unique place in God's program of redemption and remain destined for a restoration promised to them alone as a nation, the result is to reinforce a sense of ethnic privilege rather than to emphasize the New Testament's insistence that all men stand before the Lord on the same footing apart from Christ. Ironically, while Paul warns the believing Gentiles against boasting because of their inclusion

(Romans 11:18–20), the futurist doctrine tends to foster the very kind of ethnic pride that his argument is intended to exclude.

One searches the apostolic writings in vain for exhortations directing Christians to regard unbelieving Jews as occupying a favored spiritual status above other unbelievers. On the contrary, the consistent message of the New Testament is that all men, whether Jew or Gentile, stand in equal need of the saving grace revealed in Jesus Christ.

11.3 The Futurist Interpretation Diverts Attention from the Preaching of the Gospel

The futurist doctrine can also have the unintended effect of diverting attention from the central New Testament concern: the proclamation of the gospel. The apostles did not respond to Jewish unbelief by emphasizing a future national restoration, but by preaching Christ. Paul's desire was not to speculate concerning Israel's future, but to "save some of them" through the gospel (Romans 11:14). The need of the Jews was no different from that of every other people: repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

One of the paradoxes of this view is that, although it has taught Christians for centuries to expect a mass conversion of the Jews, it has often directed their attention away from the evangelization of the Jewish people. Generation after generation, Christians look ahead to a great conversion of the Jews while comparatively little attention is given to calling the Jews of their own day to repentance and faith in the Savior.

This inclination is not difficult to understand. If one has become convinced that a dramatic revival is going to occur in some distant age, and that the future generations upon whom this grace will be poured constitute "all Israel," then what urgency remains to call present-day Jews to repentance and faith? The expectation naturally encourages Christians to await the visible signs of that transformative event rather than to labor for the conversion of the Jews of their own generation through the ordinary preaching of the gospel.

The belief may also reinforce a reluctance already present in many Christians to confront Jewish unbelief with the call to repentance and faith in Christ. If the expectation of a large-scale conversion in the future is combined with a fear of giving offense in the present, the result can be even greater hesitation to proclaim to the Jews the same gospel that the apostles preached to every nation.

This is not to deny that some faithful Christians and missionary societies have labored to bring the gospel to the Jews and have even been inspired to do so by hope in what they believed to be a promise of a future restoration of Israel. One such example was given earlier in this article. Nevertheless, when compared with the vast number of ministers, theologians, and other Christians who have embraced the future conversion doctrine over the centuries, such efforts have been remarkably few. If this expectation

is truly one of the Church's great prophetic hopes, one might have expected the evangelization of the Jews to have occupied a correspondingly prominent place in Christian ministry. Instead, the belief appears to have been conducive to passivity, with Christians awaiting the manifestation of a great revival among the Jewish people rather than laboring for their present conversion.

12. The Practical Value of Romans 11 for Christians Today

If Romans 11 is not predicting a national conversion of the Jews, but instead describes a process already taking place in Paul's day, what significance does it have for Christians today?

The value of studying Romans 11 does not depend upon a belief that it is a prophecy concerning Israel. Its significance lies in the truths it reveals concerning God's faithfulness to his covenants, His sovereign grace in salvation, His dealings with the Jews and the Gentiles, and the manner in which He gathers His people through the proclamation of the gospel.

One important lesson in Romans 11 is that the Lord is faithful to His promises. The apparent unbelief of the majority of Israel did not mean that God's word had failed. Paul reminds his readers that even in Elijah's day God had preserved a remnant for Himself: "I have reserved to myself seven thousand men, who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal" (Romans 11:4). Paul then showed that the same principle applied in his own time: "Even so then at this present time also there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans 11:5). The practical lesson is that the Triune God's purposes are never frustrated by man's unbelief. He continues to preserve and gather His people according to His sovereignty even when circumstances seem discouraging.

Closely related to this is the lesson that Christians must not judge God's purposes by present circumstances. The question Paul is addressing in Romans 9-11 arises from the seeming contradiction between God's promises and Israel's condition. Yet what appeared to be a failure of God's purpose was actually the means by which it was being accomplished. Israel's unbelief became the occasion for the salvation of the Gentiles, and the salvation of the Gentiles became one of the means through which the Lord continued to gather His elect from among Israel. Romans 11 therefore teaches believers to trust the wisdom of God even when His providence appears mysterious and His purposes seem hidden from view.

Romans 11 also teaches the necessity of humility. Gentile believers are warned not to boast over those Jews who had been cut off in unbelief. Paul writes: "Boast not against the branches" (Romans 11:18) and again, "Be not highminded, but fear" (Romans 11:20). Salvation comes not through ethnic descent or merit, but through the grace of God. Thus, the chapter calls believers to humble gratitude for God's mercy.

Confidence in evangelism is another lesson of the chapter. Paul's response to the unbelief of the Jewish majority was not resignation but earnest labor for their salvation. He describes his ministry among the Gentiles as a means of provoking his countrymen to emulation, "if by any means I may provoke to emulation them which are my flesh, and might save some of them" (Romans 11:14). The chapter teaches that conversion is never only a future hope but always a present reality whenever the gospel is being faithfully proclaimed.

The chapter also encourages hope concerning those who presently remain in unbelief. Speaking of the Jews who had been broken off, Paul declares: "And they also, if they abide not still in unbelief, shall be grafted in: for God is able to graft them in again" (Romans 11:23). No one is beyond the reach of divine grace. The same God who converted Saul of Tarsus is able to save others who appear equally hardened. Christians therefore have every reason to persevere in the hope that He will yet bring such sinners to faith in Christ.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Romans 11 directs believers to marvel at the wisdom and faithfulness of God. In the chapter Paul is not merely concerned with the fate of Israel, but with the vindication of God's purpose in history. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones observed, Romans 9–11 is fundamentally a "theodicy," that is, "a justification of the ways of God."¹⁰⁶ Paul demonstrates that God's promises have not failed because His dealings with men are perfectly consistent with His faithfulness to His covenant and His sovereign will.

What appeared to be Israel's rejection became the means for the salvation of the Gentiles, while the salvation of the Gentiles became one of the means through which the Lord continued to gather His elect from among Israel. Having traced these extraordinary workings of divine providence, Paul concludes with worship: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" (Romans 11:33). Lloyd-Jones rightly observed that the climax of Romans 11 directs attention not merely to a particular doctrine but to "the eternal and glorious consistency of God."¹⁰⁷

Far from lacking practical relevance, Romans 11 speaks directly to the church today. The Lord's promises have not failed. His electing purpose remains unchanged. He continues to gather one people to Himself from among all nations. The chapter remains as relevant today as it was when Paul first wrote it, encouraging believers to proclaim the gospel with confidence while trusting in God's sovereignty, and to respond with worship as they behold the wisdom of His ways in the salvation of men.

13. Questions and Objections Answered

The preceding sections have presented the positive case for the interpretation defended in this article. The questions and objections most frequently raised in response are addressed below, together with references to the portions of the article where each subject is discussed more fully.

What follows is intended primarily as a reference tool rather than as a continuation of the discussion. Most of the points addressed here have already been examined at greater length elsewhere in the article. Readers need not read this entire section from beginning to end, but may instead consult the particular questions that correspond to their own concerns.

13.1 Questions of Basic Interpretation

Doesn't this article improperly take promises made to Israel and instead apply them to the Church?

No. The article does not argue that promises made to Israel may be arbitrarily reassigned to the Church. Rather, it seeks to follow the way in which the New Testament itself interprets and applies Old Testament promises. In several instances, the apostles apply Old Testament restoration language to the people of God in Christ, including both Jews and Gentiles. The New Testament identifies the fulfillment of many of these promises in the Lord Jesus Christ and in the people united to Him.

See Section 3.2, "The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone"; Section 3.3, "Paul's Application of Old Testament Prophecy in Romans 9–11"; and Section 7, "The Broader Witness of the New Testament Concerning a Future Conversion of the Jews."

Doesn't this article begin with New Testament theology and then read it back into the Old Testament?

No. The article does not argue that later revelation may alter the meaning of earlier revelation without textual warrant. It recognizes that the New Testament provides the inspired and authoritative interpretation of the Old Testament. All Christians routinely interpret Old Testament passages in light of New Testament revelation concerning the Messiah, the kingdom of God, the inclusion of the Gentiles, and many other subjects. If the apostles apply Old Testament restoration language to Christ and to the people united to Him, then Christians are not at liberty to ignore that inspired interpretation and substitute another.

See Section 3.2, "The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone"; Section 3.3, "Paul's Application of Old Testament Prophecy in Romans 9–11"; and Section 7, "The Broader Witness of the New Testament Concerning a Future Conversion of the Jews."

This article claims that Romans 9 through 11 is one continuous argument. Where is the evidence of that?

The evidence is found in the structure of the text itself. Romans 9–11 addresses a single overarching question: how God's promises to Israel can remain trustworthy despite the widespread unbelief of the Jews. Virtually no commentator disputes that these three

chapters constitute one sustained argument. Paul raises that question at the beginning of Romans 9 and immediately answers it with the declaration that "they are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (Romans 9:6). From that point forward, he develops a sustained argument concerning election, unbelief, the remnant, the calling of the Gentiles, and God's faithfulness to His promises. Romans 11 builds upon conclusions already established in Romans 9 and 10. To interpret Romans 11 apart from Romans 9 and 10 is to separate Paul's conclusion from the argument upon which it rests.

See Section 2.1, "The Unity of Romans 9–11"; and Section 2.2, "The Present-Time Framework of Romans 9–11."

Why does this article place so much emphasis on Romans 9:6 when interpreting Romans 11?

It does not place undue emphasis on Romans 9:6. It recognizes Romans 9:6 as the opening statement of a principle that Paul repeatedly develops throughout Romans 9–11. The verse is important because it introduces Paul's answer to the central problem under discussion: how God's promises to Israel can remain true despite the widespread unbelief of the Jewish people. Paul's answer is that God's promises were never intended for every ethnic Israelite indiscriminately. This principle is then reaffirmed throughout the argument in Paul's discussion of election (Romans 9:7–24), the remnant (Romans 9:27–29; 11:1–7), the unbelief of many within Israel (Romans 9:30–33; 10:1–21), the hardening of the rest (Romans 11:7–10), and the salvation of those Jews whom the Lord has purposed to save (Romans 11:5, 12, 14, 23–26). Romans 9:6 is therefore not an isolated proof text, but the opening statement of the theme that governs Paul's argument throughout Romans 9 through 11.

See Section 2.1, "The Unity of Romans 9–11"; and Section 4, "The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant."

The article asserts that there are two controlling factors in Romans chapters 9 through 11—the present-time framework and the remnant principle—but isn't this just starting with assumptions and then imposing them on the text in order to reach a preferred conclusion?

No. These principles are not imported into the text, they arise naturally from it. Paul repeatedly describes circumstances existing in his own day, using present-tense language throughout Romans chapters 9 through 11 to explain how God's promises remain faithful despite the widespread unbelief of the Jews. Likewise, the distinction between the elect remnant and the rest of Israel is introduced at the outset of the discussion and repeatedly reaffirmed throughout the argument. These are not interpretive assumptions imposed upon the text, but observations derived from its own language, structure, and repeated themes.

See Sections 2.2, “The Present-Time Framework of Romans 9–11”; and 4, “The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant,” together with Tables 1 and 2.

13.2 Questions Concerning Romans 11 Itself

How can Romans 11:12 be speaking of only a small remnant when in reference to the Jews, it speaks of “their fulness”?

The word “fulness” does not by itself require a national restoration of Israel or the salvation of every Jew. Throughout Romans 9–11, Paul consistently teaches that God's promises never applied to the children of Israel indiscriminately, but only to the elect within Israel (Romans 9:6–8, 27; 11:5–7). Consequently, the “fulness” of Israel should not be understood as the salvation of the Jewish nation as a whole, but as the complete ingathering of all those Jews whom God intends to save. Paul is arguing that if the unbelief of many Jews has brought blessing to the Gentiles, then the ongoing salvation of many Jews will bring an even greater blessing. Nothing in the verse introduces a full national conversion or a future time frame.

See Section 4, “The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant”; Section 6.2, “The Redemptive Purpose of Israel's Stumbling (Romans 11:11–24)”; and Section 6.3.3, “No Matter How ‘The Fulness of the Gentiles’ Is Interpreted, It Tells Us Nothing About What Follows (Verse 11:25).”

Doesn't the contrast between “the casting away of them” and “the receiving of them” in Romans 11:15 imply a future national restoration of Israel? If not, how can Paul describe it in such a dramatic term as “life from the dead”?

No. In the immediate context, Paul has just spoken of his desire to “save some of them” through his ministry (Romans 11:14). The most natural reading is that “the receiving of them” refers to the same process: the reception of Jews into Christ through faith. The contrast is between Jewish unbelief and Jewish belief, not between a present rejection and a future national restoration. Nor does the phrase “life from the dead” require a mass conversion at some later date. Paul is describing the remarkable reality that spiritual life is springing forth from among a nation largely hardened in unbelief and so appears to be spiritually dead.

See Section 4, “The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant”; and Section 6.2, “The Redemptive Purpose of Israel's Stumbling (Romans 11:11–24).”

Doesn't Paul's description of the broken-off natural branches being grafted back into the olive tree (Romans 11:23–24) imply a future national restoration of Israel?

No. The olive tree represents the one covenant people of God, into which both believing Jews and believing Gentiles are incorporated through faith. The fact that broken-off

Jewish branches may be grafted in again demonstrates that Jews who come to faith in Jesus Christ can be restored to their place among God's people. The passage teaches the possibility of Jewish restoration through faith in Christ, not the certainty of a future national restoration. Nothing in the passage states that all or most Jews will be grafted in at the same time, or that the Jewish nation as a whole will be restored at some later date. Paul's point is that Jewish unbelief is not irreversible. The Lord is able to save Jews and graft them back into the same olive tree from which unbelief had excluded them.

See Section 5, “The Olive Tree and the One People of God”; and Section 6.2, “The Redemptive Purpose of Israel's Stumbling (Romans 11:11–24).”

How can the “mystery” of which Paul speaks in Romans 11:25 be the salvation of the elect remnant, if this was already occurring and everyone could see it happening around them without any need for a special revelation?

The mystery is not the existence of the remnant or even its salvation. Paul has already discussed the remnant repeatedly throughout Romans 9–11 (Romans 9:6, 27; 11:5–7), and its existence was plainly visible. Rather, the mystery is the previously hidden relationship between Israel's partial hardening, the ingathering of the Gentiles, and the salvation of the elect Jewish remnant. What Paul reveals is that these are not separate developments, but interconnected parts of a single divine plan. Israel's stumbling has not frustrated God's purpose; it has served as the means by which salvation has come to the Gentiles and by which God is saving the totality of His elect from among Israel. The mystery, then, is not the events themselves, which were visible to all, but the divine purpose underlying them, revealed by God through the apostle.

See Section 6.3.1, “Paul's Explanation of the Mystery.”

Doesn't “blindness in part” in Romans 11:25 imply a temporary hardening of the Jews that will later be removed?

No. In Romans 11, the hardening is “in part” because it does not affect all Israelites. Paul has already distinguished between the believing remnant and the hardened majority (Romans 11:5–7). The phrase describes a partial hardening in extent, not a temporary hardening in duration. Nothing in the expression itself indicates that the hardening will one day cease altogether or that the hardened majority will subsequently be converted. That conclusion must be supplied from outside the passage rather than derived from its actual wording.

See Section 6.3.1, “Paul's Explanation of the Mystery (Verse 11:25)”; and *Section 6.3.2, “The Word 'Until' Does Not Indicate a Change (Verse 11:25).”*

Doesn't “until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in” (Romans 11:25) imply a sequence in which Gentile conversion is completed first and Israel's conversion follows afterward?

No. The verse states that Israel's partial hardening continues until the fulness of the Gentiles comes in, but it does not say that the hardening then ceases or that a national conversion follows. Those conclusions must be supplied from outside the text. Paul is describing the same process already unfolding in his own day: God's partial hardening of Israel, the ingathering of the Gentiles, and the salvation of the elect remnant. The futurist interpretation requires an additional step between verses 25 and 26—a distant national conversion of Israel—that Paul never mentions

See Section 6.3.3, “No Matter How ‘The Fulness of the Gentiles’ Is Interpreted, It Tells Us Nothing About What Follows (Verse 11:25)”; and *Section 6.3.7, “Has Paul Suddenly Shifted to the Distant Future and to National Israel in Verses 11:25–26?”*

Doesn't the word “until” in Romans 11:25 imply a turning point? That is, a future change in Israel's condition?

No. The word “until” does not by itself imply that the condition preceding it will afterward be reversed. It simply marks a point in time. Romans 11:25 states that Israel's partial hardening continues until the fulness of the Gentiles comes in, but it never says that the hardening then ceases or that the nation as a whole is subsequently converted. Thus, the verse does not itself establish a turning point in Israel's condition much less a reversal of it. Those conclusions must be supplied by the interpreter, not derived from the word “until” itself. Indeed, if Paul had intended to teach a future national conversion of the Jews, it would have been natural for him to say so directly. Instead, he speaks only of a partial hardening continuing until the fulness of the Gentiles comes in, which could be even until the end of the world.

See Section 6.3.2, “The Word ‘Until’ Does Not Indicate a Change.”

The article states that it doesn't matter what “the fulness of the Gentiles” means in Romans 11:25. Why would God reveal this if it has no significance?

The article does not argue that “the fulness of the Gentiles” has no significance. It only argues that the precise meaning of the expression does not affect the timing of Romans 11:25–26. Whether it refers to the Gentile ingathering in the apostolic age, the completion of the Gentile mission, or the full number of God's elect from among the Gentiles, neither the passage itself nor the surrounding context says that a future national conversion of the Jews follows. The significance of the phrase lies in its description of the relationship between Israel's partial hardening and the inclusion of the Gentiles, not in establishing a timeline that requires a restoration of the Jews as a nation.

See Section 6.3.3, “No Matter How ‘The Fulness of the Gentiles’ Is Interpreted, It Tells Us Nothing About What Follows (Verse 11:25).”

Isn't it clear that Romans 11:26 is referring to the future?

No, although without considering the context it could seem so. Paul's use of the future tense here denotes not a chronologically remote change in God's program of salvation, but the continuation and certain completion of the process he has been describing. The totality of God's elect from among Israel “shall be saved” through the ongoing conversion of the remnant and the continual ingathering of elect Jews in the apostolic age and beyond. Nothing in Romans 11:25–26 indicates that Paul has suddenly abandoned the framework he has developed throughout Romans 9–11 and is now speaking of the nation of Israel as a whole rather than the elect remnant, or is speaking of a process not then occurring, or is speaking of a distant period of history.

See Section 2.2, “The Present-Time Framework of Romans 9–11”; Section 6.3.5, “‘All Israel’ Has Already Been Repeatedly Defined (Verse 11:26)”; and Section 6.3.7, “Has Paul Suddenly Shifted to the Distant Future and to National Israel in Verses 11:25–26?”

Isn't it most natural to interpret “all Israel” in Romans 11:26 as encompassing the entire Jewish nation?

Not in the context of Romans 9–11. Throughout these chapters, Paul repeatedly argues that God's promises never applied to all of Israel according to the flesh, but only to the elect within Israel (Romans 9:6–8, 27; 11:5–7). To interpret “all Israel” in Romans 11:26 as the Jewish nation as a whole would require abandoning the very distinction upon which Paul's argument has rested from the beginning. The interpretation defended in this article understands “all Israel” in light of Paul's consistent definition of Israel throughout Romans 9–11, not as a suddenly interjected reference to the Jewish nation indiscriminately.

See Section 4, “The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant”; and Section 6.3.5, “‘All Israel’ Has Already Been Repeatedly Defined (Verse 11:26).”

If “all Israel” in Romans 11:26 refers only to the elect remnant rather than the entire nation, why didn't Paul say so explicitly?

He had already done so by this point. Throughout Romans 9–11, Paul distinguishes between ethnic Israel as a whole and the elect remnant within Israel. He begins by denying that all who are descended from Israel are truly Israel (Romans 9:6–8). He then cites Isaiah to show that only a remnant of Israel shall be saved (Romans 9:27–29). In Romans 11, he appeals to the example of Elijah and explicitly states that a remnant exists “at this present time according to the election of grace” (Romans 11:2–

5), before concluding that “the election hath obtained it, and the rest were blinded” (Romans 11:7). By the time he reaches Romans 11:26, the distinction has already been firmly established. The question, then, is not why Paul failed to introduce the remnant at Romans 11:26, but why he would suddenly abandon the framework he has spent three chapters developing without any indication that he is doing so.

See Section 4, “The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant”; and Section 6.3.5, “All Israel’ Has Already Been Repeatedly Defined (Verse 11:26).”

Doesn't “all Israel” in Romans 11:26 refer to all the elect, composed of both Jews and Gentiles?

Some interpreters, including John Calvin, have understood “all Israel” in this way, arguing that Paul is speaking of the whole people of God without distinction. Like the interpretation defended in this article, this view rejects the idea that Romans 11 predicts a future mass conversion of the Jewish people. Instead, it likewise understands Paul to be describing the present fulfillment of God's covenanted promises. It also rightly emphasizes the unity of believing Jews and Gentiles in Christ. The olive tree represents the one covenant people of God, into which believing Jews and believing Gentiles alike are grafted. In that sense, all the redeemed together inherit the covenant promises in Christ and are united as one body. Other interpreters, such as Henry Hammond, likewise applied the expression to the whole covenant people while noting that Paul is speaking particularly of the believing Jewish remnant.

However, Paul's concern throughout Romans 9–11 is not merely to define the composition of the Church, but to explain how God's promises to Israel have not failed despite the unbelief of the great majority of Israelites (Romans 9:6). The meaning of the term “all Israel” therefore most naturally answers to the controlling question of these three chapters: Has God cast away His ancient people to whom the promises were given? Paul's answer is no, because “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Romans 9:6).

Accordingly, the immediate context favors understanding “all Israel” as referring more particularly to God's elect within ethnic Israel, whose salvation demonstrates that the Lord has not cast away His ancient people. But whether the expression is understood to refer only to those elect Israelites or to the whole covenant people while speaking more particularly of the believing Jewish remnant, the central point remains the same: Paul is explaining God's present faithfulness to His promises, not predicting a national conversion of the Jews.

The principal difference between these interpretations concerns the precise scope of the expression “all Israel,” not the fundamental argument of Romans 11. Both appropriately affirm the unity of believing Jews and Gentiles in one covenant people, both correctly understand Paul's concern to be the present fulfillment of God's saving purpose in Christ, and both rightly reject the view that Romans 11 predicts a large-scale conversion of ethnic Jews.

See Section 2.2, “The Present-Time Framework of Romans 9–11”; Section 4, “The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant”; and Section 6.3.6, “Must ‘Israel’ Have the Same Meaning in Romans 11:25 and in 11:26?”

If “and so all Israel shall be saved” (Romans 11:26) refers only to the elect remnant among Israel already being saved, doesn't Paul's argument end with an anticlimax? Doesn't the flow of Romans 11 build toward something much greater?

The supposed anticlimax arises only if one assumes that the salvation of the elect remnant is a small thing. This certainly is not Paul's estimation of the marvelous work God is doing in his day. The phrase “*and so*” means “*and in this way*” and points back to the process Paul has just explained: the partial hardening of Israel, the ingathering of the Gentiles, and the salvation of the elect Jewish remnant. The climax is not a sudden shift to a different program, but the successful completion of the very process Paul has been unfolding. Throughout Romans 9–11, Paul presents the salvation of the remnant as the fulfillment of God's promises to Israel and the proof that His word has not failed. That the Lord should save any members of a nation that had rejected His prophets, crucified the Messiah, and persecuted the church was a demonstration of extraordinary mercy. That He should continue saving many thousands of them throughout the apostolic age, gathering all whom He had chosen to save, was far from an anticlimax. It was the very outcome toward which Paul's argument had been moving from the beginning.

See Section 4, “The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant”; Section 6.3.4, “‘And So’ Does Not Mean ‘And After This’ (Verse 11:26)”; and Section 6.4, “Conclusions of the Romans 11 Exegesis.”

Doesn't Romans 11:28–29 teach that God still has an irrevocable covenant with ethnic Israel and that its future fulfillment is guaranteed because “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance”?

No. In Romans 11:28–29, Paul is not introducing a new promise of national restoration. He is explaining why the salvation of the elect remnant remains certain despite the widespread unbelief of Israel. The Jews are said to be “beloved for the fathers' sakes” because God's covenant promises to the patriarchs cannot fail. Yet throughout Romans 9–11 Paul has repeatedly argued that those promises were never intended for every Israelite after the flesh, but for the elect whom God has chosen to save (Romans 9:6–8, 27; 11:5–7). Thus, the statement that “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” guarantees the fulfillment of God's saving purpose, but it does not require a wholesale future conversion of the Jews as an entire nation.

See Section 4, “The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant”; and Section 6.3.9, “The Same Remnant Pattern Continues (Verses 11:28–32).”

Paul repeatedly uses future tense verbs throughout Romans 11. Doesn't this prove that he is speaking of future events, at least at times, and that the chapter is not limited to occurrences in his own day?

No. In some places Paul uses future tense verbs, while in others he describes God's work in the present, and in at least one instance the future tense is supplied by the English translators and does not appear in the underlying Greek text. When Paul does use the future tense, he is expressing his expectation that God's present work among Jews and Gentiles will continue beyond the time of his writing. This usage does not establish that the process Paul has already described throughout Romans 9 through 11 would later give way to a national conversion of Israel or any other set of circumstances not already described by him.

See Section 2.2, "The Present-Time Framework of Romans 9–11"; and Section 6.3.7, "Has Paul Suddenly Shifted to the Distant Future and to National Israel in Verses 11:25–26?"

If there is no prophecy about the future of the Jews in Romans 11, as this article contends, then why do so many see one there?

The future conversion of ethnic Israel has long been the most commonly taught view of Romans 11. As a result, many of those who approach the chapter expect to find a prophecy in it. Accordingly, Paul's principal expressions are *a priori* interpreted in a futurist sense, so that, for example, "their fulness" becomes all the ethnic Jews in the future rather than all the elect Jews in the present; "blindness in part" becomes a temporary hardening of all the Jews extending far into the future rather than a hardening of part of the Jews at the present time; "life from the dead" becomes a great national revival of Israel following a tremendously long period of deadness rather than the remarkable present revival arising from what appeared to be a dead nation; and "this mystery" becomes an extraordinary eschatological event rather than the surprising manner in which the Lord was then fulfilling His purpose of redemption. Once these meanings have been assumed, the remainder of the chapter is interpreted in harmony with them, and the futurist interpretation is complete.

See Section 2.2, "The Present-Time Framework of Romans 9–11"; Section 4, "The Biblical Pattern of the Remnant"; Section 6.2, "The Redemptive Purpose of Israel's Stumbling"; and Sections 6.3.1–6.3.7, "The Culmination of the Argument."

13.3 Questions Concerning Other New Testament Passages

Doesn't Acts 1:6 show that the apostles expected a restoration of Israel in the future?

No. Acts 1:6 records the apostles asking Christ, "Lord, wilt thou at this time restore again the kingdom to Israel?" The passage records a question, but Jesus does not answer it. Rather, He turns the apostles' attention away from questions concerning times and seasons and toward their imminent mission: the proclamation of the gospel

to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth (Acts 1:7–8). The remainder of the book of Acts records the fulfillment of that commission through the preaching of Christ and the gathering of believers from among both Jews and Gentiles. The objection asserts more than the text itself states.

See Section 7.1, “Christ and the Apostles Never Predict a Future Conversion of the Jews.”

Doesn't Luke 21:24 imply a restoration of Israel after the “times of the Gentiles” have ended?

No. This conclusion depends upon reading more into the word “until” than the passage actually says. Luke 21:24 states that Jerusalem “shall be trodden down of the Gentiles, until the times of the Gentiles be fulfilled.” But the word “until” does not by itself describe what happens afterward. It marks the duration of the condition being described; it does not necessarily imply that the opposite condition will follow. The verse says that Jerusalem would be trodden down by the Gentiles until the appointed time was fulfilled. It does not say that Israel would afterward be nationally restored, nor that the Jewish people would then be converted. Those conclusions must be supplied from outside the text.

See Section 6.3.2, “The Word ‘Until’ Does Not Indicate a Change (Verse 11:25)”; and *Section 7.1, “Christ and the Apostles Never Predict a Future Conversion of the Jews.”*

Doesn't Acts 3:19–21 teach a future restoration of Israel?

No. Acts 3:19–21 does not speak of a restoration of Israel as a distinct nation, but of the blessings that come through repentance and faith in Christ. In that passage Peter calls his Jewish hearers to repent, declaring:

“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus Christ... whom the heaven must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.”

The futurist interpretation often assumes that the phrase “the times of restitution of all things” refers to a national restoration of Israel. Yet nothing in the passage says this. Peter speaks of the restoration of “all things,” not of the restoration of Israel specifically. The futurist conclusion depends upon importing an idea into the text that Peter himself never expresses. Peter presents these blessings as the fulfillment of what God had spoken by the prophets and immediately urges his hearers to receive Christ as the promised Messiah. The focus of the passage is therefore not the future restoration of ethnic Israel as a nation, but the present fulfillment of God's redemption through Christ.

See Section 3.2, “The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone”; Section 7.1, “Christ and the Apostles Never Predict a Future Conversion of the Jews”; and Section 7.2, “The Apostolic Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy Is Silent About a Future Conversion of the Jews.”

Doesn't Matthew 23:39 predict a future national repentance of the Jews?

No. In Matthew 23:39, Jesus declares to Jerusalem, “For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” Some interpreters understand these words as a prediction that the Jewish nation as a whole will one day repent and acknowledge Christ. Yet nothing in the passage identifies the speakers as the Jews collectively, nor predicts a future mass conversion of them

Indeed, the statement does not even require that these words will ever be spoken. The word “till” (or “until”) merely states the condition upon which they would see Him again; it does not guarantee that the condition will ever be fulfilled. Just as if someone says, “You will not see me again until you apologize,” he has not thereby predicted that an apology will ever be offered. He has simply stated that no other meeting will occur until an apology has been received.

Advocates of the futurist position read considerably more into Jesus' words than the passage itself says. The statement occurs in the context of judgment upon Jerusalem and its leaders, and does not specify when, how, or by whom these words will be spoken.

See Section 6.3.2, “The Word ‘Until’ Does Not Indicate a Change (Verse 11:25)”; and *Section 7.1, “Christ and the Apostles Never Predict a Future Conversion of the Jews.”*

13.4 Questions Concerning Israel, the Church, and the Covenants

Doesn't the New Testament preserve a distinction between Israel and the Church?

No. The New Testament consistently presents believing Jews and believing Gentiles as members of one people of God united in Christ. Gentiles who were once “strangers from the covenants of promise” have been brought near through Christ (Ephesians 2:12–13). Christ has made both groups one and broken down the middle wall of partition between them (Ephesians 2:14–16). Both now enjoy equal standing as fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God (Ephesians 2:19). Likewise, the olive tree of Romans 11 depicts believing Jews and believing Gentiles sharing in the same covenant root rather than belonging to separate covenant peoples. Although some interpreters appeal to Galatians 6:16 and the phrase “the Israel of God” in support of such a distinction, the meaning of that phrase is disputed and cannot

overturn the broader New Testament teaching concerning the unity of God's people in Christ.

See Section 5, "The Olive Tree and the One People of God"; and Section 7, "The Broader Witness of the New Testament Concerning a Future Conversion of the Jews."

Don't the promises of the covenant made with Abraham (Genesis 12:1–3; 17:1–8) require a future national fulfillment?

No. Paul writes that the promises were made to Abraham and to his seed, and that this seed is Christ (Galatians 3:16). He further teaches that "if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29). The New Testament therefore presents God's covenant with Abraham as finding its fulfillment in Christ and in those who belong to Him by faith, not as awaiting fulfillment in a restored nation.

See Section 3.2, "The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone"; and Section 7.2, "The Apostolic Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy Is Silent About a Future Conversion of the Jews."

Doesn't God's covenanted faithfulness to Israel require the restoration of their nation?

No. God's covenanted faithfulness requires only that He fulfill every promise He has made. Throughout Romans 9–11, Paul's concern is precisely to explain how God's promises remain true despite the widespread unbelief of the Jews. His answer is not that the Lord will someday restore the Jewish nation, but that "they are not all Israel, which are of Israel" (Romans 9:6). The promises of God have not failed because they were never intended for every ethnic descendant of Abraham indiscriminately. Rather, they are fulfilled in the elect whom God calls and saves through Christ. God's faithfulness is vindicated not by a future national restoration, but by the fulfillment of His promises in precisely the manner that He intended from the beginning.

See Section 3.2, "The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone"; and Section 7.2, "The Apostolic Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy Is Silent About a Future Conversion of the Jews."

The article states that the futurist interpretation of Romans 11 reintroduces a distinction between Jew and Gentile that has been abolished under the New Testament. Yet isn't it true that those who hold this view understand that the Jews are going to be saved through faith in Christ and be part of the universal Church, and so they are not recreating that distinction?

It is certainly true that the great majority of futurist interpreters do not teach that converted Jews will constitute a separate people of God or be saved apart from faith in Christ. They understand believing Jews and believing Gentiles alike to be united in the one universal Church. In that respect, they fully affirm the New Testament doctrine of salvation by grace through faith and the unity of all believers in Christ.

The contention of this article, however, is that the futurist interpretation nevertheless preserves a distinction that the New Testament no longer recognizes as possessing significance. According to that interpretation, the Lord still has a distinct prophetic purpose for the Jews as an ethnic nation—a purpose not shared by the Gentiles—namely, a future large-scale conversion at the end of this age specifically promised in the Bible. Thus, although Jews and Gentiles ultimately belong to the same Church, the Jewish people continue to occupy a unique place in God's plan of salvation by virtue of their ethnicity alone.

The New Testament, by contrast, repeatedly emphasizes that the former distinction between Jew and Gentile has been abolished. Believing Jews and Gentiles are now “one new man” (Ephesians 2:15), fellow citizens of the same household (Ephesians 2:19), and fellow heirs, of the same body, and partakers together of the promise in Christ through the gospel (Ephesians 3:6). The promises of God belong equally to all who are united to Him, without distinction based upon ethnic descent. The argument of this article is not that the future restoration advocates divide the Church into two peoples, but that they retain a prophetic and covenantal distinction between Jews and Gentiles that the New Testament no longer recognizes.

See Section 7.2, “The Apostolic Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy Is Silent About a Future Conversion of the Jews”; and Section 11.2, “The Futurist Interpretation Reintroduces an Abolished Distinction Between Jew and Gentile.”

Many postmillennial interpreters expect a future period in which the gospel will spread throughout the world and the nations will be brought into willing submission to Christ. Could not a large-scale conversion of the Jews simply form part of that worldwide ingathering, so that Romans 11 is describing that future development rather than events occurring in the apostolic age?

It may come to pass in history that the gospel will achieve unprecedented success among the nations, but Romans 11 is not describing that period. Instead, Paul is explaining how God was fulfilling His promises to Israel in his own day through the hardening of much of Israel, the inclusion of the Gentiles, and the salvation of the Jewish elect remnant. The interpretation defended in this article rests upon the meaning of Paul's argument rather than upon any particular view of the future progress of the gospel, which is a separate question. The interpretation of a passage must be determined by its own context, not by *a priori* assumptions derived from a broader theological system.

See Section 2.2, “The Present-Time Framework of Romans 9–11”; Section 6.3.7, “Has Paul Suddenly Shifted to the Distant Future and to National Israel in Verses 11:25–26?”; and Section 12, “The Practical Value of Romans 11 for Christians Today.”

The article quotes Richard Baxter and James Calvert asserting that if the Jews were converted they would not remain a distinct people but would soon intermarry with non-Jewish Christians, as occurred among the converted Jews in the early centuries of Christianity. Is this also the position of the author?

The question is hypothetical because it assumes a future large-scale conversion of the Jewish people, whereas one of the central conclusions of this article is that Romans 11 does not teach such an event. Whether the Lord may nevertheless be pleased, in His providence, to grant such a conversion is a separate question that lies beyond the scope of this study.

If such a conversion were to occur, the historical experience of the early Church suggests that Jewish believers would soon become assimilated into the wider Christian population through intermarriage, as Baxter and Calvert argued. Given that Jewish communities in many parts of the world constitute relatively small minorities within historically Christian nations, such assimilation would appear to be a natural outcome. Nevertheless, the argument of this article does not depend upon that conclusion. The quotations from Baxter and Calvert are included to illustrate how some earlier Protestant theologians understood the implications of the New Testament's teaching concerning the unity of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. The contention of this article is simply that the New Testament no longer recognizes a covenantal or prophetic distinction between believing Jews and believing Gentiles.

See Section 7.2, “The Apostolic Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy Is Silent About a Future Conversion of the Jews”; Section 10, “Historical Christian Witnesses Against a Future Restoration of the Jews”; and Section 11.2, “The Futurist Interpretation Reintroduces an Abolished Distinction Between Jew and Gentile.”

13.5 Questions Concerning the Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecies About the Restoration of Israel

Don't the Old Testament prophecies about the restoration of Israel support the future conversion doctrine in Romans 11, and vice versa?

No. A circular method of reasoning is often employed in support of the futurist interpretation. Romans 11 is read in light of Old Testament prophecies assumed to teach a future national restoration, while those same prophecies are then read in light of the assumption that Romans 11 predicts such a restoration. Romans 11 is read in light of Old Testament prophecies assumed to teach a future national restoration, while those same prophecies are then read in light of the assumption that Romans 11 predicts such a restoration. The result is an interpretive cycle in which the conclusion is

repeatedly reinforced by being carried back and forth between the passages rather than established independently from either. But the repetition of an assumption does not transform it into evidence.

The proper approach is to determine the meaning of each passage according to its own context before allowing it to illuminate another. The Old Testament restoration prophecies must first be interpreted according to the manner in which Christ and His apostles apply them in the New Testament. Likewise, Romans 11 must first be interpreted according to Paul's own argument in Romans 9–11. Only after each has been understood on its own terms may they legitimately be brought together. When this is done, neither independently establishes the doctrine of a future large-scale conversion of the Jews, and therefore neither can be used to establish it by appeal to the other.

See 3.2 , “The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone”; 6.3.5 “All Israel’ Has Already Been Repeatedly Defined (Verse 26)”; and 7.2 “The Apostolic Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy Is Silent About a Future Conversion of the Jews”.

Many Old Testament passages speak of the Jews returning to God, being regathered from among the nations, being restored as a people, and enjoying the covenant blessings promised by the prophets. These include Jeremiah 30–33, Ezekiel 36–37, Isaiah 11, Isaiah 27, Zechariah 12, Amos 9, and many others. Don't such passages require that national Israel be reconstituted in the future or that there be a large-scale conversion of the Jews?

No. Many of these prophecies were given in the context of Israel's exile and contain promises that found an initial fulfillment in the return from captivity and the restoration of the nation to the land. Yet the prophets often describe these blessings in terms that transcend anything realized in that post-exilic restoration, pointing forward to greater blessings associated with the coming of the Messiah and the establishment of the new covenant. As demonstrated throughout this article, the apostles repeatedly apply Old Testament restoration language to the Lord Jesus Christ in the establishment of the new covenant and the gathering of God's people through the gospel.

See Section 3.1, “The Misuse of Old Testament Prophecy to Support the Future Restoration Belief”; Section 3.2, “The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone”; Section 3.3, “Paul's Application of Old Testament Prophecy in Romans 9–11”; and Section 7, “The Broader Witness of the New Testament Concerning a Future Conversion of the Jews.”

This article argues that many Old Testament restoration prophecies were fulfilled in a twofold manner: first in the return from Babylonian exile and

ultimately in the coming of the Messiah. But aren't there other applicable prophecies that don't fit neatly within that pattern and appear to describe realities never fulfilled in either of those events?

The fact that a prophecy contains details not immediately explained by this twofold pattern does not prove that it predicts a national restoration of the Jews that is future to our time. As demonstrated throughout this article, the New Testament repeatedly applies Old Testament restoration language to Jesus Christ in the establishment of the new covenant and the gathering of God's people through the gospel. Individual prophecies should be interpreted consistently with that apostolic pattern rather than used to overturn it. Even if a particular prophecy cannot yet be satisfactorily explained within this framework, that does not establish that it predicts a future national restoration or large-scale conversion of the Jews. Such a conclusion must be demonstrated from the text itself. This article contends that no such demonstration can be made.

See Section 3.1, "The Misuse of Old Testament Prophecy to Support the Future Restoration Belief"; Section 3.2, "The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone"; Section 3.3, "Paul's Application of Old Testament Prophecy in Romans 9–11"; and Section 7, "The Broader Witness of the New Testament Concerning a Future Conversion of the Jews."

The article demonstrates that the Old Testament restoration prophecies were fulfilled in the return of the Jews from the Babylonian exile and further fulfilled in the gospel age, but rejects the possibility of a third level of fulfillment in a future large-scale conversion of the Jews. Is it not possible that this could also be part of those prophecies?

The issue is not what the Old Testament restoration prophecies could possibly include, but what the Holy Scriptures reveal that they do include. The question is whether Scripture gives any indication that they require a further fulfillment beyond those already identified by Jesus Christ and His apostles. This article contends that it does not. The New Testament repeatedly presents these prophecies as fulfilled through Jesus Christ in the proclamation of the gospel and the gathering of His people. To assert a third level of fulfillment requires positive exegetical evidence from the Bible itself. The mere possibility of a further fulfillment does not establish that one was intended. Possibility is not proof.

See Sections 3.1 "The Misuse of Old Testament Prophecy to Support the Future Restoration Belief"; 3.2 "The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone"; and 3.3 "Paul's Application of Old Testament Prophecy in Romans 9–11."

Why does the article regard a future large-scale conversion of the Jewish people as constituting a third level of fulfillment of the Old Testament restoration prophecies? Could it not instead be viewed as the culmination of the second level of fulfillment already taking place in Christ and the present gospel age?

If the future conversion of the Jews were simply portrayed as the culmination of processes already occurring throughout the present gospel age, during which the nations progressively come to Christ, the terminology of a “third fulfillment” might indeed be questioned. The issue, however, is that those who advocate the futurist view of Romans 11 generally understand it to predict an end times event concerning the Jews that occurs only after the completion of the Gentile mission and, according to many interpreters, includes the restoration of the Jews to their ancestral homeland. It is presented not merely as the continued outworking or culmination of the present gospel age, but as a further prophetic realization still awaiting fulfillment at the close of history. The contention of this article is that once the Old Testament prophecies about the restoration of Israel have reached their greater fulfillment in Christ and the gathering of His people under the new covenant, no exegetical necessity remains for positing such an additional realization.

See Section 3.1, “The Misuse of Old Testament Prophecy to Support the Future Restoration Belief”; Section 3.2, “The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone”; Section 3.3, “Paul’s Application of Old Testament Prophecy in Romans 9–11”; and Section 12, “The Practical Value of Romans 11 for Christians Today.”

Don't God's promises to give the land of Canaan to Abraham and his descendants require a future return of the Jews to that land?

No. The New Testament presents the land of Canaan as pointing to a higher reality, with the land promises directing attention beyond the earthly inheritance to the greater heavenly inheritance secured by Jesus Christ. As with the temple, the sacrifices, the Aaronic priesthood, and other Old Testament institutions, the type gives way to its fulfillment in the New Testament antitype. Abraham himself is presented as looking beyond the earthly land to “a better country, that is, an heavenly” (Hebrews 11:16), while believers are described as heirs according to the promise through Christ (Galatians 3:29). Likewise, the New Testament identifies Christ as the true temple (John 2:19–21), illustrating the broader biblical pattern that Old Testament types find their fulfillment in Him rather than in a future restoration of their earthly forms. The land promises belong to that same pattern, pointing ultimately to the heavenly inheritance of all His people, not a return of the Jewish people to Canaan.

See Section 3.1, “The Misuse of Old Testament Prophecy to Support the Future Restoration Belief”; and Section 7.2, “The Apostolic Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy Is Silent About a Future Conversion of the Jews.”

Isn't this interpretation merely “spiritualizing” Old Testament prophecy by taking promises concerning Israel's restoration, regathering, and covenant blessings and applying them to Christ and the Church rather than to Israel as a nation?

No. This interpretation does not deny or merely spiritualize the Old Testament prophecies. Rather, it seeks to interpret them in the same manner as the inspired New Testament authors. The charge assumes that restoration promises must be fulfilled in the precise national form in which they were originally expressed. Yet the apostles repeatedly apply restoration language to Jesus Christ and, through Him, to the blessings of the new covenant that are enjoyed by His people, including the Gentiles. If they applied these promises in this way, then following their interpretation is not spiritualizing the text but submitting to its inspired interpretation.

Indeed, the insistence that the restoration promises must be fulfilled in their original national form closely resembles the expectation held by many first-century Jews. They anticipated a Messiah who would literally restore the kingdom to Israel, reign from David's earthly throne, and overthrow Israel's political enemies. Because Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures in a manner far greater than those expectations anticipated, many rejected Him. The New Testament consistently teaches that the promises were fulfilled in Christ and His kingdom, not that they failed because they were not realized according to popular Jewish expectations. To insist that those same prophecies must yet receive a separate national fulfillment is therefore to return to the very interpretive framework that the New Testament itself corrects.

See Section 3.1, “The Misuse of Old Testament Prophecy to Support the Future Restoration Belief”; Section 3.2, “The Restoration Language of Old Testament Prophecy Was Applied by the Apostles to the Entire Church, Not to the Jews Alone”; and Section 7.2, “The Apostolic Interpretation of Old Testament Prophecy Is Silent About a Future Conversion of the Jews.”

13.6 Other Questions

Isn't the remarkable preservation of the Jews as a distinct people for the last two thousand years evidence that God has a special blessing remaining for them as a nation?

No. The continued existence of a people does not by itself establish what the Lord has promised concerning their future. Many nations and ethnic groups have survived for long periods of time without any corresponding promise of national restoration. God may have preserved the Jews for reasons entirely different from those often assumed, including as a continuing example to the world of the awful consequences of rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ. Consequently, even if their preservation is regarded as remarkable, it does not follow that Romans 9–11 promises a national conversion.

See Section 9, “The Continued Existence of the Jewish People Is Not Evidence for Their Future Restoration.”

Are you limiting the conversion of the Jews of which Paul speaks to the apostolic age?

No. This interpretation does not limit the conversion of Jews to the apostolic age. The only point denied is that Romans 11 promises a national conversion of ethnic Israel or a distinct coming era in which the present pattern of God's saving work will be replaced by another.

However, both the New Testament and early Christian history indicate that the greatest ingathering of Jews occurred during the first century and the period immediately following it. Thereafter, Jewish conversions appear to have diminished greatly and remain few today.

See Section 2.2, "The Present-Time Framework of Romans 9–11"; Section 6.3.7, "Has Paul Suddenly Shifted to the Distant Future and to National Israel in Verses 11:25–26?"

This article sometimes speaks of the “national restoration” of the Jews and sometimes their “national conversion.” Are these terms being used synonymously?

Yes. As these expressions are used in this article, they refer to the same doctrine. Although many interpreters distinguish between the widespread conversion of the Jews to Christianity and their restoration as a national entity in their own land, this article is concerned primarily with the former. Because most proponents of the futurist interpretation regard that future national conversion as the principal fulfillment of God's covenant promises to Israel, it is also described as their restoration. Accordingly, the terms national restoration and national conversion are used interchangeably throughout this article unless the context indicates otherwise.

Isn't it true that many of the theologians quoted in this article held the opposing future restoration view?

Some of the theologians quoted in this article did not agree with the interpretation of Romans 11 defended here. But this does not undermine the argument. The purpose of citing theologians who ultimately reached different conclusions is not to suggest that they agreed with every aspect of this interpretation. It is to demonstrate that important elements of the interpretation defended in this article have long been recognized within the Protestant churches, and that their observations support specific exegetical points advanced here regardless of the conclusions they themselves ultimately reached.

See Section 3.3, "Paul's Application of Old Testament Prophecy in Romans 9–11," and Section 10, "Historical Christian Witnesses Against a Future Restoration of the Jews."

Isn't this interpretation motivated by a hatred of the Jews? That is, not wanting to believe that God still loves them and so denying that there is a blessing remaining for them?

No. The interpretation defended in this article is based upon what Romans 9–11 actually says, neither upon hostility nor partiality toward the Jewish people. It does not deny that individual Jews may still be converted, or even that large numbers of Jews may yet be converted at some point in history. It simply denies that Romans 9–11 promises a conversion of the Jewish people as a nation. All Christians should desire to see Jews come to Christ and no longer remain in rebellion against the Lord and his people, but the question is not what one might wish to be true concerning the future. The question is what Paul actually teaches in the text.

See Section 1.1, “Why This Matters”; Section 1.3, “What This Article Does Not Argue”; and Section 6.3.7, “Has Paul Suddenly Shifted to the Distant Future and to National Israel in Verses 11:25–26?”

The article states that the future restoration view of Romans 11 benefits the Jews because it supports the belief that God still has some special favor for them. That being the case, it seems the Jews would have an interest in promoting the doctrine. Is there any evidence that they were involved in its formulation or have helped to advance it?

It appears that the doctrine of a future restoration of the Jewish people arose within Christian theology. Jews strongly reject the idea that they will ever come to Jesus Christ, so it is very unlikely that they would formulate a doctrine teaching a widespread Jewish conversion to Christianity. Outside of a small number of "Messianic Jews," very few Jewish people, including the most religious, have read the New Testament, and they certainly do not produce commentaries on it. It would be surprising to find Jewish authors promoting a particular interpretation of Romans 11.

This does not mean, however, that the practical consequences of the doctrine have gone unnoticed by Jewish leaders. There is considerable evidence that they have recognized the political, diplomatic, and financial benefits of Christians who already hold these beliefs. Rather than promoting the doctrine itself, they have frequently cultivated relationships with Christian Zionists who do so because of the support that commonly accompanies their theological convictions. Thus, while the doctrine itself appears not to be of Jewish origin, but an error that originated entirely within the Christian Church, its practical consequences have often been recognized and welcomed by those Jews who benefit from the support it engenders.

See, 11.1 “The Futurist Interpretation Encourages Special Treatment of Ethnic Jews.”

Doesn't the Westminster Larger Catechism teach a future national conversion of the Jews?

No. In its answer to Question 191, the Westminster Larger Catechism includes the petition that “the Jews [be] called.” However, it does not define the manner, extent, or timing of that calling, nor does it state that Romans 11 teaches a national restoration or large-scale conversion of the Jews. The language is equally consistent with the ordinary calling of Jews through the preaching of the gospel throughout the present age. Although many of the Westminster divines personally expected a future widespread conversion of the Jewish people, that expectation is not stated anywhere in the Westminster Standards. More importantly, even if such had been their intent, the historical opinion of the divines cannot determine the meaning of Romans 11. The question must ultimately be settled by the teaching of Scripture itself.

See Section 6.3.5, “All Israel” Has Already Been Repeatedly Defined (Verse 11:26),” and Section 6.3.7, “Has Paul Suddenly Shifted to the Distant Future and to National Israel in Verses 11:25–26?”

Isn't this interpretation a modern innovation?

No. Although the futurist interpretation has become dominant in many Reformed and evangelical circles, similar non-futurist interpretations have appeared throughout church history, and a number of Christian writers have understood Romans 11 as not requiring a large-scale conversion of the Jews in any period of history. More importantly, the truth of an interpretation is not determined by its age, but by its faithfulness to the Bible. Even if an interpretation were held by only a minority of commentators, that fact alone would neither prove nor disprove its correctness. The decisive question is whether the interpretation accurately reflects Paul's argument in Romans 9–11.

See Section 1.4, “Is This a New Interpretation?”; and Section 10, “Historical Christian Witnesses Against a Future Restoration of the Jews.”

If this interpretation is correct, why have so many respected Reformers, Puritans, and later Reformed commentators held a different view?

While many Reformers, Puritans, and later Reformed commentators expected a future large-scale conversion of the Jews, others understood Romans 11 differently. Nor should it be assumed that, because Protestants have long warned against following inherited tradition and placing implicit faith in the teachings of men, they are themselves immune to these dangers. There have been Christians in every age who accepted longstanding interpretations with little critical reexamination. Ultimately, the question is not which interpretation has attracted the greatest number of supporters, but which best explains Paul's argument in Romans 9–11.

See Section 1.1, “Why This Matters”; and Section 10, “Historical Christian Witnesses Against a Future Restoration of the Jews.”

14. Conclusion

The evidence presented in this article leads to a clear conclusion: the futurist interpretation of Romans 11 is false. Paul is not interrupting his argument to introduce a prophecy concerning the future national conversion of the Jews. He is bringing to its conclusion the argument he began in Romans 9, explaining how God has remained faithful to His promises despite the unbelief of the majority of Israel in his own day.

From Romans 9:6 onward, Paul answers the problem of Jewish unbelief by distinguishing between the nation as a whole and the elect remnant within it. God's promises have not failed because they were never intended for every ethnic descendant of Abraham. "They are not all Israel, which are of Israel." This distinction governs Paul's argument throughout Romans 9–11 and appears repeatedly throughout the passage. Romans 11 does not point beyond the apostolic age to a future mass conversion event. It explains how God's covenant promises were already being fulfilled through the salvation of the elect remnant together with the ingathering of the Gentiles.

This interpretation also accords with the broader witness of the New Testament. The Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles consistently apply the Old Testament restoration promises to their fulfillment in Him and in the establishment of the new covenant Church. Likewise, when they speak of the Church's future hope, they direct believers to the return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the final judgment, and the consummation of the kingdom. They nowhere teach that the restoration of the Jews is an object of Christian expectation. They nowhere teach that the restoration of the Jews is an object of Christian expectation.

By contrast, the futurist interpretation of Romans 11 cannot be reconciled with this apostolic framework. It abandons Paul's consistently present-time setting in favor of a distant future for no good exegetical reason, replaces the remnant principle that Paul repeatedly reinforces with a doctrine of national restoration that is never stated in the text, and treats the apostolic application of the Old Testament restoration prophecies as incomplete, pending a dramatic end-time conversion. This interpretation rests not upon the cumulative testimony of Scripture, but on a series of assumptions imported into key passages and used to interpret others. When those assumptions are examined in the context of each passage, in light of the inspired interpretation given by Christ and His apostles, and in the overall flow of Paul's argument, they collapse, and with them the interpretation they support.

The practical consequences of the futurist view have been profoundly harmful. By erroneously assigning ethnic Jews a unique status in God's program of salvation, it has produced numerous theological errors and practical distortions. It has perpetuated an unbiblical covenant distinction between Jews and Gentiles, encouraged tolerance toward anti-Christian activity by Jews, given rise to systems of biblical interpretation that create division within the church, engendered foolish and unprofitable

controversies concerning the future of the Jews and the proper attitude of the church toward them, distorted the interpretation of other biblical passages, justified political and religious favoritism toward the Jews and the present-day Zionist state in the Middle East, and diverted attention from the apostolic response to Jewish unbelief: the proclamation of the gospel and the call to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

The futurist reading of Romans 11 is both false and destructive. It cannot be reconciled either with Paul's argument or with the broader witness of the New Testament, and its practical consequences have only confirmed the destructive character of its theological error.

Paul's answer is simple. The Lord has not failed in His promises to Israel because those promises have been fulfilled exactly as He intended. God ordained Israel's partial hardening so that the Jews' rejection of the gospel would lead to the apostles' proclamation of the gospel among the Gentiles. According to His sovereign purpose, it was embraced by many. Through the salvation of the Gentiles, He then provoked His elect among the Jews to jealousy so that they too came to faith in Christ. Thus, the rejection of the gospel by the majority of the Jews, which many regarded as evidence that God's promises to Israel had failed, was actually one of the principal means by which He was fulfilling those promises. In this way, all Israel was being saved—not through a future national conversion, but through the salvation of the elect remnant according to grace. This is the teaching of Romans. It is the interpretation demanded by the text itself, and those who would submit to the authority of Holy Scripture must reject all others.

Romans chapters 9 through 11 display the glory of God as He accomplished the salvation of many through means that no man could have conceived. It is therefore fitting that Paul concludes this portion of his Epistle with a doxology to the unsearchable wisdom and knowledge of God:

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”
(Romans 11:33–36)

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Endnotes:

- ¹ Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. VI (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Company, n.d.), pp. 452–453.
- ² Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Philadelphia: William S. & Alfred Martien, 1864), p. 584.
- ³ Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans*, new ed., enlarged, Vol. II (Edinburgh: William Whyte & Co., 1842), pp. 394–95.
- ⁴ R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg Press, 1945), 714, quoting a translation by B. M. Christensen from Ole Hallesby, *Den Kristelige Trøstrelære*, vol. 1, p. 658.
- ⁵ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *An Overview of Romans 9 to 11*, sermon preached October 5, 1962
- ⁶ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, commentary on Romans 9:8, *SwordSearcher* Bible Software.
- ⁷ Herman Ridderbos, *Israel in the New Testament, Especially According to Romans 9–11*, trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr., in Guy Prentiss Waters and Richard B. Gaffin Jr., “Herman Ridderbos and Romans 11 – Two New Translations,” *Reformed Faith & Practice* 8, no. 2 (Spring 2024): p. 21.
- ⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1938), p. 699.
- ⁹ John Brown of Wamphray, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Edinburgh, 1766), p. 464 (on Romans 11:26–27).
- ¹⁰ Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, on Matthew 24:4-31, *SwordSearcher* Bible Software
- ¹¹ Matthew Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, on Jeremiah 30:18 and 33:15, *SwordSearcher* Bible Software.
- ¹² John Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition upon the Old and New Testaments*, on Jeremiah 30:3, *SwordSearcher* Bible Software.
- ¹³ Trapp, *A Commentary or Exposition upon the Old and New Testaments*, on Jeremiah 30:18.
- ¹⁴ H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary*, on Jeremiah 31:31, *SwordSearcher* Bible Software.
- ¹⁵ Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, introduction to Jeremiah 30.
- ¹⁶ Joseph Sutcliffe, *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, on Jeremiah 30:18, *SwordSearcher* Bible Software.
- ¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, on Isaiah 27:13.
- ¹⁸ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Bible*, introduction to Isaiah chapters 24-27, *SwordSearcher* Bible Software.

- ¹⁹ Charles John Ellicott, *Ellicott's Bible Commentary for English Readers*, introduction to Isaiah chapters 24-27.
- ²⁰ John Trapp, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, on Isaiah 27:13.
- ²¹ *The Geneva Bible* (1599), note on Isaiah 25:6, *SwordSearcher* Bible Software.
- ²² *Geneva Bible*, on Isaiah 27:13.
- ²³ Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, on Amos 9:11–15.
- ²⁴ Poole, *Annotations upon the Holy Bible*, on Amos 9:11.
- ²⁵ Barnes, *Notes on the Bible*, on Amos 9:15,
- ²⁶ C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, on Amos 9:11, *SwordSearcher* Bible Software.
- ²⁷ *Geneva Bible*, on Amos 9:11,12, and 14.
- ²⁸ John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (London: T. Tegg, 1840), vol. 1, p. 316
- ²⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on Isaiah*, on Isaiah 1:9.
- ³⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 714.
- ³¹ William Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 363.
- ³² Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 363.
- ³³ Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 599.
- ³⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, on Romans 11:5.
- ³⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 362.
- ³⁶ Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New Testament*, on Romans 11:32.
- ³⁷ Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 363.
- ³⁸ The final word of Paul's citation is the Greek adverb *διαπαντός* (*diapantos*), translated “alway” in the KJV. The term commonly means “continually,” “constantly,” “always,” or “at all times,” and may even bear the sense of “perpetually.” On this expression, Lenski remarks, “*διαπαντός* does not sound like a future conversion of the Jews which will end their Judaism and its long-standing results.” While the word by itself does not settle the interpretation of Romans 11, it naturally denotes an ongoing condition rather than suggesting that Paul expected Israel's judicial hardening to cease during history before the end of the age.
- ³⁹ James Burton Coffman, *Commentary on Romans* (Austin, TX: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1973), p. 396.
- ⁴⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, 695.

- ⁴¹ O. Palmer Robertson, “Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?” in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology: Papers from the Thirtieth Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 216.
- ⁴² C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 215.
- ⁴³ Sigurd Odland, *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (1937), on Romans 11:26a
- ⁴⁴ Moses E. Lard, *Commentary on Paul's Letter to Romans* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1888), pp. 358–59.
- ⁴⁵ Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 582–583.
- ⁴⁶ Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 376.
- ⁴⁷ Lloyd-Jones, *The Mystery Revealed*, sermon on Romans 11:25–27, preached March 5, 1965
- ⁴⁸ Elling Hove, *Christian Doctrine* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1930), p. 427.
- ⁴⁹ Lloyd-Jones, *The Mystery Revealed*
- ⁵⁰ Hove, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 424.
- ⁵¹ Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (New York: American Book Company, 1889), entry for ἄχρι.
- ⁵² Coffman, *Commentary on Romans*, 413–14, quoting R. L. Whiteside, *A New Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to Saints in Rome* (Denton, Texas: Miss Inys Whiteside, 1945), p. 226.
- ⁵³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 721.
- ⁵⁴ James Calvert, *Naphtali: Seu Collutationes Theologicæ cum Tribus Ingentibus Dubiis* [*Naphtali; or, Theological Disputations on Three Great Questions*] (London: Andrew Clark for Richard Lambert, 1672), p. 40. All the English quotes of the book contained in this article are A.I. translations from the original Latin.
- ⁵⁵ Ridderbos, *Israel in the New Testament*, p. 21.
- ⁵⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 721.
- ⁵⁷ Coffman, *Commentary on Romans*, p. 414.
- ⁵⁸ Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, entry for οὕτως.
- ⁵⁹ Robertson, *Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?*, p. 222.
- ⁶⁰ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 454.
- ⁶¹ Hendriksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, p. 379.

⁶² Odland, *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (1937), on verse 11:26a

⁶³ Ridderbos, *Israel in the New Testament*, p. 21.

⁶⁴ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 699.

⁶⁵ John Lightfoot, *The Whole Works of the Rev. John Lightfoot, D.D.*, vol. 3 (London: J. F. Dove, 1822), p. 411.

⁶⁶ Hugo Grotius, *Annotationes in Epistolam ad Romanos* on Romans 11:12, 25–26, as quoted in James Calvert, *Naphtali* (1672), Book II, Chapter IV, p. 40.

⁶⁷ Henry Hammond, *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon All the Books of the New Testament* (London: J. Flesher for Richard Royston, 1653), annotation on Romans 11:25.

⁶⁸ Hove, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 435.

⁶⁹ Hove, *Christian Doctrine*, p. 439.

⁷⁰ Robertson, *Is There a Distinctive Future for Ethnic Israel in Romans 11?*, p. 212. Robertson notes that the repeated use of *vōv* (now) emphasizes Paul's concern with present realities. The critical Greek text used by Robertson contains three occurrences of *vōv* in Romans 11:30–31, whereas the Textus Receptus underlying the KJV contains two. The emphasis on the present nevertheless remains evident in either text.

⁷¹ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, p. 453.

⁷² Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, p. 453.

⁷³ This entire section is based upon parts of Herman Bavinck's survey of the New Testament's teaching concerning Israel in *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, pp. 446–456. The presentation here is a comprehensive paraphrase rather than a quotation and has been reorganized and supplemented with additional explanation and scriptural references.

⁷⁴ Lightfoot, *Works*, vol. 6, pp. 393–94.

⁷⁵ Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, pp. 43–50. The foregoing two-paragraph summary follows Calvert's compilation of the evidence, which he assembles from numerous ancient and later historical authorities, including Josephus, Eusebius, Cassius Dio, Carion, Hoornbeeck, Weemes, and others.

⁷⁶ Richard Baxter, *The Glorious Kingdom of Christ, Described and Clearly Vindicated* (London, 1691), p. 54.

⁷⁷ James Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, Chapter IV, pp. 42, 46, 56.

⁷⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, pp. 718–719

⁷⁹ Coffman, *Commentary on Romans*, pp. 414–415.

⁸⁰ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. W. F. Trotter (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), fragment 640 (Brunschvicg numbering).

⁸¹ Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, pp. 40–41.

- ⁸² Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, Calvert carefully cites the original authorities from whom he draws his quotations and historical information.
- ⁸³ Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 56.
- ⁸⁴ Hegesippus, *Book II*, chap. 12, as quoted in Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 53.
- ⁸⁵ Origen, *Contra Celsum (Against Celsus)*, as quoted in Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 53.
- ⁸⁶ *Dialogus IV* attributed to Gregory Nazianzen, as quoted in Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 54.
- ⁸⁷ John Chrysostom, *Fourth Homily Against the Jews*, as quoted in Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 53.
- ⁸⁸ Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah 1:6* and *Commentary on Jeremiah 19:10*, as quoted in Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 54.
- ⁸⁹ Theodoret of Cyrus, *Interpretation on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, commentary on Zechariah 13:8–9
- ⁹⁰ Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 55.
- ⁹¹ Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 49.
- ⁹² Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 56.
- ⁹³ Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 42.
- ⁹⁴ Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, pp. 56–57.
- ⁹⁵ Hammond, *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon All the Books of the New Testament*, annotation on Romans 11:25.
- ⁹⁶ Hammond, *A Paraphrase and Annotations upon All the Books of the New Testament*, annotation on Romans 11:25.
- ⁹⁷ Calvert, *Naphtali*, Book II, chap. IV, p. 56.
- ⁹⁸ Baxter, *The Glorious Kingdom of Christ*, p. 9.
- ⁹⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, on Romans 11:26.
- ¹⁰⁰ Samuel Clark, *A Collection of the Promises of Scripture, under Their Proper Heads* (Boston: Hall & Hiller, 1803), Introduction, p. 28.
- ¹⁰¹ Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, p. 584.
- ¹⁰² Hermann Olshausen, *Biblical Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, trans. John Eadie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1851), p. 373.
- ¹⁰³ Lloyd-Jones, *The Mystery Revealed*

¹⁰⁴ Lawrence J. Rabone, *Eschatology and the Readmission of the Jews to England, 1655–56* (PhD diss., University of Manchester, 2021), Abstract, 6; esp. pp. 63–97.

¹⁰⁵ William G. Williams, *An Exposition of the Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Cincinnati: Jennings & Pye, 1902), p. 351.

¹⁰⁶ Lloyd-Jones, *An Overview of Romans 9 to 11*, preached October 5, 1962

¹⁰⁷ Lloyd-Jones, *An Overview of Romans 9 to 11*