

THE FUTURE OF ETHNIC ISRAEL

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SUMMARY

A cast list of the Bible's story would include Israel—ethnic descendants of Abraham—near the top of the list. One perennial question, however, is whether this character—these people—play any continuing role in the plot now that the story's climax has been reached with Jesus' first advent. It's this question—does Israel have a continuing role, a future, in God's story—that we will (begin to) answer in this essay.

For an answer, we'll look at one place in the New Testament that addresses this question head-on: Romans 9–11. What we'll see is that Israel, as a corporate entity, a people-group, does have a continuing place in God's story, even in the New Testament era. God promises, in fact, that he'll save Israel and that he'll do it in a surprising way.

Introduction

Does Israel have a future? It's a big, how-you-put-your-Bible-together type of question. In fact, to give anything close to a satisfying answer would require synthesizing hundreds of texts, some more straightforward than others. For this reason the question has been debated throughout Christian history, with some insisting that Israel has no future—the church, in fact, has replaced Israel, others that Israel has a future—sometimes complete with a distinct mission and zip code, and still others falling somewhere in between. It's this question, moreover, that's responsible, at least in part, for giving Christian theology the labels *Dispensationalism* and *Covenant Theology*, along with a handful of others including *Progressive Covenantalism*.

It's of course not possible to lay out all the arguments for these positions here, much less to list and discuss the texts underlying each. What we can do, however, is look at one place in the Bible where this question is addressed, both directly and by an apostle—God's inspired interpreters of the Old Testament—namely Romans 11. And while we won't arrive at anything close to a comprehensive answer to the question, we can, nevertheless, establish a foundation upon which an answer like that could (and, indeed, must) rest.

Romans 11

Romans 9–11 addresses a big problem in the first-century, at least according to Paul (see, esp., Rom. 9:2 and 10:1): there were very few Jewish Christians. This observation corresponds to what we are told in the Gospels and Acts, which suggest that God's messiah, Jesus, was, by and large, rejected by his own people. And this, for Paul, was a big deal, considering how many times God promised Abraham's descendants that he'd be their God and they would be his people (see "promises" in Rom. 9:4; see also Jer. 31:31–34, cited, in part, in Rom. 11:27). In fact, this is why for Paul the problem was bigger than Jewish unbelief. It was really a problem with God's character. How can Jews be God's enemies (Rom. 11:28) when God had promised that they'd be his people? And this is why it was not simply an acute problem for Paul and the Jewish people but also for Gentile Christians. After all, how could Gentile Christians trust God's promises to them, if he'd broken his promises to Israel? So, Paul asks in Romans 9–11 whether God's word to Israel has failed (Rom. 9:6).

Paul answers this question in three moves, essentially one in each chapter (9:6–29; 9:30–10:21; 11:1–32), and it's in his final move that he addresses the question of Israel's future head-on. Paul begins defending God's integrity by insisting that he never promised to save every single Jewish person. It's true, God set Israel apart as a people (see, e.g., "people of Israel," in 9:4). But this setting-apart, this corporate or national election, didn't guarantee the salvation of every Jewish citizen. Salvation, after all, wasn't based on race but on grace (11:6) or, as Paul puts it at this point, "mercy" (9:15). Paul then defends God's integrity by insisting that Israel's unbelief was precisely what God had anticipated. Quite apart from the fact, therefore, that Israel's failure was self-inflicted (unbelief), God had anticipated this failure all along. He'd foretold it, which meant that Israel's present status didn't contradict God's word; it confirmed it.

Then, in Romans 11, Paul defends God's integrity by insisting that Israel has a future. Specifically, he says that Israel as a people-group, a corporate or national entity, will be saved. Paul argues that while God never promised to save every last citizen of Israel, he did, nevertheless, promise to save Israel.

Israel's Corporate Salvation

"Israel" in Romans 11 is a corporate, people-group-identifying label. We see this most clearly in Romans 11:7 (see also "Israelite" and the reference to "tribe[s]" in 11:1–2). In this verse Paul identifies three categories: "the people of Israel," "the elect among them" (i.e., the remnant, v. 5), and "the others who were hardened."

"What the people of Israel sought so earnestly they did not obtain. The elect among them did, but the others were hardened."

Israel is a composite label for two sub-categories: an elect remnant and a hardened majority. And what Paul describes in this verse recalls what he said about



Israel's initial response to Jesus in 9:30–33. Because Israel “pursued the law as a way of righteousness,” they “have not attained their goal.” They “stumbled over” Jesus in unbelief because they’d (sinfully) misunderstood the law’s purpose (10:1–4). What Paul adds here, however, is that this wasn’t true of every first-century Jew. Some, “the elect among” the people of Israel, didn’t stumble over Jesus. Rather they believed in him and obtained the righteousness that is by faith. “[T]he people of Israel,” as a whole, however, did not, because those beyond the elect remnant—“the others”—failed to believe. And, because of this, they “were hardened.”

Paul refers to Israel as a corporate entity, a people-group, and he says that their present “partial hardening” was the result of their unbelief. (He does not say, at least here in Romans 11, that the hardening was the cause of their unbelief.) That is, all of first-century Israel was confronted with Jesus (i.e., Israel as represented by those in Judea who had seen Jesus; see, e.g., John 1:11; Acts 3:13–16). Those who believed were saved, and those who didn’t were hardened. Later and importantly Paul will refer to those hardened as those who “have been broken off” from the olive tree (v. 17; see also 19 and 20; also “cut off” in v. 22), indicating that both the remnant and the others were at one time part of the same tree and that it was their response to Jesus that determined whether they stayed on or were broken off (i.e., hardened). And Paul will go on to talk about Jewish salvation not as further adding to the remnant but, rather, as reversing the hardening of the others. That is, Paul says that he wants to “save some of” his “own people” (v. 14) and when he talks about which group these saved would come from/be added to—the elect remnant or the others (v. 7)—he talks exclusively of the latter. He talks about re-grafting branches that have been broken off (v. 23; see also v. 24) and of reversing the status of those who’ve been hardened (see v. 25, “a hardening in part until...”; see also v. 31, though the second “now” is textually-uncertain).

If, therefore, Israel is a corporate entity, comprised of an elect remnant and a hardened majority (v. 7), and if Israel’s salvation entails not the expansion of the remnant but the progressive restoration of the hardened majority (see v. 14 in the light of v. 23), then when Paul speaks of Israel’s “full inclusion” (v. 12) and, especially, of “all Israel” being “saved” (v. 26a; cf. “Jacob” in v. 26b), he’s talking about the salvation and, therefore, restoration of the corporate whole. He’s saying, in effect, that while God never promised to save every Jewish citizen, he did promise to save the people-group, the corporate entity, the nation. Not every broken-off branch will be grafted back in. (Surely Paul knew Jews who had died in unbelief in the first century.) But the part of the tree that was barren due to the majority’s unbelief would be filled back in, not with an expanded remnant (or simply with Gentiles) but with re-grafted branches—with previously-unbelieving and, therefore, hardened Jews.

Paul pictures the nation as a tree, one that is currently asymmetrical due to the broken off, unbelieving majority. And he insists that God’s promise entails the salvation, the re-grafting in, of a sufficient number of presently broken-off branches so that in the end what is saved will be a symmetrical tree, that is, corporate Israel.

Israel’s Corporate Salvation, the Gentile Mission & the Parousia

Paul not only insists that Israel’s future includes corporate salvation, he also tells us how and when this will take place. This is where Romans 11 gets really interesting. Israel’s corporate salvation will take place through the surprising means of Gentile salvation. Jewish unbelief, Paul says, led to the Gentile mission and, therefore, to Gentile belief, which then has the effect of provoking Jewish belief (see, esp., vv. 11–14). And this process, Paul tells us, will end at the resurrection/Parousia (see v. 15), which is, in any case, what we’d expect, since we’re told elsewhere in the New Testament that the Parousia is delayed precisely to allow time for salvation (2Pet. 3:9; on the connection between resurrection and the Parousia, see 1Cor. 15:23). What may also point in this direction are Paul’s Old Testament citations in Romans 11:26b–27, which many understand as describing Jesus’ second advent.

It’s possible, but by no means certain, that Paul anticipated a final, climactic end to the progressive reversal of Israel’s hardening. The fact of present reversal, however, makes a decision about a climactic final reversal far less important. That is, unless we insist that there will be no reversal of Israel’s present hardening until the end—until the fullness of Gentiles has come in—then whether or not there’s a final, climactic reversal concluding the present progressive reversal is, perhaps, interesting, but not terribly important. And as we’ve seen, such a reading would fail to take into account that Paul says his Gentile mission targeted the salvation of the presently-hardened majority. When he talks about Jewish salvation after the division of verse 7, he speaks specifically about re-grafting (v. 23; see also v. 24) and reversal (v. 25), not the expansion of the remnant.

Conclusion

Does Israel have a future? Paul answers this question in Romans 11 with a resounding “yes.” Israel as a people-group, a corporate-entity, a nation, will be saved. Israel’s hardened status is being reversed and, upon the full inclusion of all Gentiles, will be fully reversed. Paul’s answer, of course, isn’t comprehensive. It doesn’t say anything, for example, about Israel’s land or about a penultimate (millennial) kingdom. But what it does say is that (1) Israel will be saved, (2) this salvation is taking place now and will conclude at Jesus’ return, (3) it will lead to the resurrection from the dead, (4) it happens as a result of the Gentile mission, and (5) it is a re-grafting of unbelieving Jews into their own tree (in concert with a grafting in of Gentiles to the same tree).