

# Romans 11: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[ 0 : 00 ] Romans chapter 11 What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking.

The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened. As it is written, God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes that would not see, and ears that would not hear, down to this very day.

And David says, Let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block and a retribution for them. Let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see, and bend their backs forever.

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means. Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous.

Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean? Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then, as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them.

[ 1 : 43 ] For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others, and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches.

If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.

That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God. Severity towards those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off.

[ 2 : 44 ] And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in. For God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree?

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers. A partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.

And in this way all Israel will be saved. As it is written, The deliverer will come from Zion. He will banish ungodliness from Jacob. And this will be my covenant with them, when I take away their sins.

As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

For just as you were at one time disobedient to God, but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have been disobedient, in order that by the mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy.

[ 3 : 51 ] For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and how inscrutable his ways!

For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him, and through him, and to him, are all things.

To him be glory forever. Amen. In the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul declares that through the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah, God has bared his holy arm before the nations, and wrought salvation in fulfilment of his promises.

This gospel is the power of God for salvation for everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. It delivers the Jews from the condemnation of the Torah that they were under, and Gentiles from their state of exclusion, grafting them into the one people of God, in which they share in the spiritual blessings of Israel.

Yet at the heart of this glorious declaration of God's work of salvation, lies troubling questions of divine faithfulness. For while the gospel is making inroads among the Gentiles under the ministry of Paul and others, the Messiah has largely been rejected by his own people.

[ 5 : 06 ] Much of the later half of the book of Romans is devoted to addressing the question of how this perplexing state of affairs could come to be, and in Romans 11 this comes to its height.

Paul recognises the troubling force of this challenge, something that raises questions about God's justice itself. If the Jews have been cast off, or stumbled so as to fall completely, as the situation might appear to some, then the very character of the covenant-keeping God is thrown into doubt, and a dark shadow is cast over the gospel itself.

In chapters 9-11 of Romans, Paul turns to address this question directly. Tracing the story of Israel from its patriarchal origins, through the Exodus, and into the period running up to the exile, he demonstrates that from the very beginning, Israel has been formed purely by unconditioned divine grace.

God determined that Abraham's line would be called through Isaac, and chose Jacob over Esau his brother. He raises up and brings low adversaries like Pharaoh to demonstrate his power. He can reduce the innumerable hosts of a rebellious people to a small remnant, and form a new people from those who were never a people.

But how can this be squared with God's covenant commitment to his people? Paul begins to answer this by presenting himself, a Benjaminite descendant of Abraham, as proof that God has not in fact rejected his people Israel utterly.

[ 6 : 27 ] Then, once again, he turns to Israel's covenant history to locate parallels with the current situation. During the ministry of Elijah, for instance, God reassured the prophet that, even though the nation had largely fallen away, he had reserved 7,000 faithful men as a remnant.

In much the same way, Paul maintains, God had reserved a chosen remnant of grace in his day. However, the majority of the nation were hardened in judgment, and suffered rejection.

Paul proceeds to discuss the mysterious ways in which the conversion of the Gentiles and the stumbling of Israel fit into God's purposes. He denies that the stumbling of Israel occurred in order that they might fall.

Rather, it happened in order that the Gentiles might be included, and that through their inclusion, Israel might be made jealous. Here we should recall Paul's reference to Deuteronomy chapter 32 verse 21 in the preceding chapter.

I will make you jealous of those who are not a nation. With a foolish nation, I will make you angry. Paul believes that his own ministry as the apostle to the Gentiles is involved in God's purpose in this regard.

[ 7 : 32 ] His mission is not merely performing the role of bringing in the Gentiles, but through the bringing in of the Gentiles, exciting his Jewish compatriots to jealousy, so that they too might be saved.

Paul employs the image of an olive tree, with natural branches cut off, and wild branches grafted in to illustrate the situation in his day. The wild branches are grafted in contrary to nature, contrasting with the natural branches, which, even if broken off, could easily be grafted in again.

The wild branches grafted in enjoy their place by a sort of double grace. Not only are they supported by the root, as the natural branches are, but their very inclusion in the tree is solely by virtue of a radical act of gracious engrafting.

Paul cautions Gentile believers not to vaunt themselves over the natural branches, knowing that the natural branches, by virtue of their origin, enjoyed by promise some sort of title to God's covenant riches that the Gentiles never possessed.

In chapter 9, verses 4-5, Paul had enumerated the blessings and covenant privileges that were proper to his Jewish compatriots. They are Israelites, and to them belong the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises.

[ 8 : 43 ] To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen. The concept of jealousy plays an important role in Paul's developing argument.

As graciously adopted children in the family of the covenant, Gentiles ought to act in a manner that provokes jealousy in the wayward natural sons. Faithful Gentiles manifesting the riches that the Jews rejected.

Even after they have largely rejected his gospel, Paul can make the most startling claims concerning natural Israel status. For instance, in verses 28-29, Just before his argument erupts into its doxological crescendo, Paul declares a divinely established symmetry between the deliverance of Gentiles from their formerly unbelieving state, and the mysterious act by which, through the mercy shown to Gentiles, Israel itself might be shown the most remarkable mercy.

In verses 30-32, For just as you were at one time disobedient to God, but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient, in order that by the mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy.

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Christians have differed in how they have made sense of Paul's argument in Romans chapter 11, arguably the crux text for discussions of the future of Israel.

[10:14] The question of the identity of the All Israel, that Paul says is going to be saved in verse 26, is one that serves to manifest much of the range of different readings that are on offer.

A minority of interpreters, John Calvin and N.T. Wright among them, have identified All Israel in verse 26, as the Jew plus Gentile people of God in Christ. Yet, even though commentators like Wright may helpfully highlight some of the complexities that the gospel exposes and introduces in the definition of Israel, the readers of Romans could be forgiven for confusion at such a sudden shift in the meaning of a term that has been fairly stable in its reference to national Israel throughout Paul's argument to this point.

Others, like William Hendrickson, have argued that it refers to the full complement of Israel's remnant elect, who alone constitute true Israel. The fullness of Israel in verse 12 refers then to the complete number of the various remnants of elect Israelites over the centuries, rather than to any more general salvation of the people of Israel.

As in the Jew plus Gentile people account of Wright and Calvin and others, national Israel mostly disappears in this account. This, it seems to me, introduces serious problems into Paul's argument, as it is precisely the question of God's commitment to his promises to national Israel that are at issue.

While the remnant may serve as an assurance that God isn't completely finished with national Israel yet, by themselves they certainly do not constitute a fulfilment of his commitment to the Jewish people.

[11:44] Devolving all old covenant promises onto the Messiah, a route that some others have suggested, seems to get God off the hook with a technicality, but it undermines the very logic of the Messiah's representation in the process.

For God to strip the olive tree of almost all of its natural branches and repopulate it with grafted wild branches instead, raises serious questions about the tree's continued identity.

Even if we maintain that the Messiah is the root of the olive tree, bearing all of the branches, the olive tree is not reducible to its root, much as the body of Christ isn't merely reducible to its head.

Paul is clear that the branches themselves, even while broken off, retain immense significance.

They are natural branches, continuing to belong to a tree that is deprived of something proper to it, as long as they are unattached to it.

For Paul, they remain beloved for the sake of their forefathers, in verse 28, and they are holy on account of the forefathers, in verse 16. While the identity of Israel can be focused upon, and born by the Messiah, it cannot simply be alienated onto the Messiah.

[12:47] As Paul says in the context, the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Indeed, Paul's claim in verse 15 suggests the most startling relationship between the Messiah and the nation of Israel, even in its state of rejection.

The rejection of Israel is the reconciliation of the world, and their acceptance would mean life from the dead. The story of the Messiah, cast away for the reconciliation of the world, is recapitulated in his people according to the flesh.

Just as the Messiah was raised from death, so must Israel be, and when they are, it will mean resurrection. The symmetries with Paul's statement in verse 10 of chapter 5, For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life, must be noted here.

Just as Gentiles were reconciled by the death of the Messiah, so they were reconciled on account of the rejection of Israel. Just as we were loved while enemies, so Israel is still now beloved, even though they are enemies of the Gospel.

The people of Israel still have a part to play in redemptive history, a part to which the deep narrative logic of their national story determinedly gestures forward. This event of Israel's restoration causes Paul's argument in Romans 11 to ascend into the ecstatic heights of praise.

[14:06] It is an event that supposedly heralds a far more exceeding blessing for the world than their trespass ever did, as Paul argues in verse 12. If their trespass meant that salvation came to the Gentiles, their restoration must be remarkable in its effects.

It is, as I have noted, an event spoken of in language redolent of Christ's own death and resurrection, an event that after the reconciliation of the world entailed by the rejection, will entail life from the dead, in verse 15.

Paul speaks of this event in the grandest of terms and expressions, as Israel's fullness, in verse 12, as the salvation of all Israel, in verse 26, as the banishing of ungodliness from Jacob, and the taking away of their sins.

In this event, the mysterious purpose of God will be finally disclosed. We can be forgiven for finding the claim that this has already been fulfilled somehow, both unconvincing and underwhelming. The destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 is an event of epochal significance in New Testament theology. It represents the decisive end to the Old Age with its covenantal order and the full establishment of the New Covenant Age.

[15:12] The shadow of this event lies over the entirety of the New Testament. We should resist notions of a dual covenant, the idea that Israel has its own track and the Gentiles have theirs.

Even though Jews and Gentiles stand in differing relationship to it, there is only one olive tree and Gentiles now participate in the spiritual blessings of Israel. This is a truth that we see in Romans chapter 15, verse 27, and Ephesians chapter 2, verses 11 to 22.

AD 70 has ramifications for Israel's continuing identity, an identity which, even if it isn't simply alienated from them, as some suppose, can only be fulfilled in their rejected Messiah.

Nevertheless, this neither abolishes nor straightforwardly secularizes their peoplehood. There is such an abundance of biblical prophecy and promise concerning Israel in both the Old and New Testaments that must be either ignored or spiritualized away in order to accomplish this.

Besides all of this, the troubling questions of God's justice and narrative continuity that Paul wrestles with in Romans and elsewhere are greatly exacerbated by simplistically supersessionist positions.

[16:18] Promises whose relation to fulfilments can only be grasped in terms of highly involved hermeneutical systems and theological frameworks are appropriately viewed with suspicion, as are those who make them.

We should be wary of fulfilments divorced from any natural reading of the promises in question. When God claims, for instance, that the offspring of Israel will not cease from being a nation before him forever, in Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 35 to 37, to interpret these words as a reference to the church is greatly to strain both the text and the credulity of its readers and to raise unsettling concerns, if not about the truthfulness of God's promises, at least about their clarity.

If God has already fulfilled the word of Romans 11, it seems as though, relative to what the text might have led us to believe, a dramatic, glorious and climactic revelation of the greatness of God's mercy and wisdom in the fullness of time, it was just a bit of a damp squib that went almost completely unrecognised.

Likewise, when Israel's national history is presumed to have reached its terminus in the destruction of Jerusalem or AD 70, save to the degree that it was transposed into the story of the church, much of the narrative energy and many of the driving concerns of the Old Testament must simply be abandoned after the advent of Christ.

As Gentile Christians, as we see in Romans chapter 4, we are the children of Abraham, vitally connected to the story of Israel, as we see in 1 Corinthians chapter 10, sharers in their spiritual blessings, as we see in Romans 15, 27, and one new Jew-Gentile people in Christ, in Ephesians 2, in which the Jew-Gentile opposition is no longer determinative of covenant membership.

[17:58] Such convictions, against the distortions of movements such as dispensationalism, can excite our crucial recognition that the Old Testament is a word that addresses us in Christ.

However, there are dangers lying in the other direction here, of spiritualising the Old Testament away from the obstinate particularity of Christ's people according to the flesh. In presuming that we already know how the story of Israel ends, we are in considerable danger of reading scripture inattentively, unalert to the many threads of the story of Israel in Old and New Testaments that are still loose, waiting to be tied up.

One of the salutary effects of adopting a more careful reading of the New Testament's teaching concerning Israel, the New Covenant, the Church, and the future, a reading that doesn't presume that all the loose ends are sewn up in Christ's first advent, may be a greater attentiveness to the innumerable suggestive details and unresolved narrative threads in the scripture.

For instance, Luke gives us several details that anticipate a restoration of Israel that does not seem to have yet occurred. In the Olivet Discourse, for instance, Jesus prophesies the judgment of AD 70, but also indicates events beyond that.

They will fall by the edge of the sword and be led captive among all nations, and Jerusalem will be trampled underfoot by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. The similarity of the last clause of this statement with Romans chapter 11 verse 25 should be noted.

[ 19 : 24 ] In Luke chapter 22 verse 30, Jesus promises that the apostles will sit on thrones judging the 12 tribes of Israel, again suggesting the probability of Israel having some role to play in the future.

Even after the death and resurrection of Christ, the apostles want to know when the kingdom will be restored to Israel. In Acts chapter 1 verse 6, they present Jesus to the Jews as the Messiah appointed for them, who will fulfill the promise of the great prophet, whom Israel will hear.

In chapter 3 verses 19 to 26, Acts, the expectation of the restoration of Israel and the dramatic surprise of its non-occurrence is a crucial driving theme of the book of Acts.

The book begins with the question of the time of the restoration of Israel and ends with the judgment of Isaiah chapter 6 verses 9 to 10. In chapter 28 of Acts, verses 23 to 28, we might also note here that Acts begins with similar themes to 1 Kings, a departing David, the establishment of officers in the new regime, a gift of the spirit of wisdom and the building of a temple.

And it ends on a similar note as 2 Kings, with decisive judgment on Israel and a Jewish remnant in exile at the heart of the Gentile Empire, which crushes Jerusalem, with their former imprisonment somewhat relieved and kind treatment from the nations.

[ 20 : 41 ] How then should we think about Israel in the present situation? In discussing this subject, it is important to keep the distinctions and relations between Israel and the covenant in mind. In the old covenant, the covenant was more or less coterminous with the nation of Israel.

In the new covenant, the covenant includes many peoples. The new covenant is the fulfillment of promises made to the people of Israel under the old covenant, but includes many other peoples beyond them.

The new covenant establishes a new international people who relate to God on an equal footing, but it doesn't merely dissolve people into an indiscriminate multitude. Jews, Greeks, Romans, etc. remain. Jews, as the natural and firstborn seed of Abraham, now need to relate to Gentiles as full siblings in the family of Abraham. They don't cease to be a distinct people, nor is that distinction a matter of unimportance though.

The birth or adoption of many further children may mean that the firstborn no longer exclusively enjoys family membership, but he doesn't cease being the firstborn. Israel alone among the nations was born directly from divine blessing in the call of Abraham.

[ 21 : 45 ] All the other nations were judged at Babel and have needed to be engrafted into blessing. While unbelieving Gentiles bore no relationship to the family of Abraham, unbelieving Jews are rebellious sons, alienated from blessings and covenant riches that should be their proper possession.

The full inclusion of Israel is the eschatological hope of the restoration of a people. In the Old Testament, the Lord makes special promises to Israel as his people, and he is the king of Israel. However, there is also the promise that the Lord's kingdom will one day extend over the whole earth and bring many other peoples under it. The kingdom should be then distinguished from the people. Kingdoms can grow beyond their origins.

For instance, the United Kingdom used to be three separate kingdoms. Wales was annexed to the Kingdom of England in the first half of the 1500s. The Kingdom of Ireland, while distinct, was from Henry VIII in personal union with the English crown, as the same king was the king of both.

Later, in 1603, James VI of Scotland inherited the thrones of England and Ireland, becoming monarch of all three kingdoms and bringing them into personal union, even while the kingdoms remained formally distinct.

[ 22 : 54 ] In 1707, the Acts of Union formed a single kingdom of Scotland and England together, with the United Kingdom being formed with the addition of the Kingdom of Ireland in 1801. While we may typically trace the history of the monarchy of the United Kingdom back through the kings of England, other distinct peoples such as the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Irish now come under this monarchy.

Let's say we had a situation where the English people were generally rejecting the monarchy and becoming republicans, while the United Kingdom prospered and expanded to include peoples who had once rejected it, such as, say, the French and the Americans.

It would clearly be a tragedy, made more tragic by the fact that they were rejecting something that was clearly especially appropriate to England. Paul is making a very similar point in Romans chapter 11.

Christ Jesus, the Messiah, while the Lord of all nations and peoples, is a Jew and the King of the Jews. The Kingdom of God was once limited to Israel but now spreads across the globe.

However, as long as Christ is rejected by his own people, there is a glaring missing piece, no matter how much the Kingdom of God prospers elsewhere. A question to consider.

[ 24 : 06 ] How is the great theme of grace that runs through the Book of Romans developed more fully in the context of Israel's rejection and the Lord's response to it?