Romans 9–11 and the People of God: Why Israel Has a Future in God’s Plans

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Romans 9

9:1-13
In Romans 9-11, Paul addresses the people of God with the emphasis being on God’s plans for Israel in light of the nation’s current rejection of Christ. Paul discusses Israel’s unbelief and how it can be explained in light of God’s promises to the Israel in the Old Testament. He starts out by describing the great sorrow he has for his fellow Israelites who have not believed. His sorrow is such that he wishes he could be accursed by God on their behalf if that were possible. (9:1-3).

While Israel as a whole is in a current state of unbelief, Paul views Israel as still being related to what was given to them in the Old Testament: adoption as sons, God’s glory, the covenants, the giving of the Law, temple service, and the promises of God (9:4-5). There is no indication that these great things have been forfeited by Israel or transferred to a redefined Israel.

For Paul, Israel’s current state of unbelief does not mean that God’s Word has failed (9:6). He offers two reasons why. First, while all who are physical descendants of Israel may be part of “Israel,” the title of true Israel only belongs to ethnic Jews who have believed (9:6). Thus there is a true Israel within ethnic Israel—believing Jews.

Second, God’s purposes have often been selective. The line of promise runs through Isaac and not other sons that Abraham had through other women. Ishmael, for example, is a descendant of Abraham via Hagar, but he is not part of the promised line—Isaac is (9:7-9). Likewise, although Esau and Jacob were twins, both coming from Isaac and Rebekah, the child of promise was the younger, Jacob (9:10-13). So even with twins from the same mother God’s election is such that he chooses one over the other. Also, while there is certainly individual selection taking place on God’s part in His choice of Jacob over Esau, there is also national selection as well in that Jacob represents favored Israel while Esau represents Edom.

9:14-33
God’s sovereignty in regard to His choice is again illustrated in the example of Pharaoh, whom God raised up to demonstrate His power (9:14-18). The potter and clay analogy also illustrates God’s right to do what He pleases with His creatures (9:19-23). This sovereignty applies to God’s choice of both Jews and Gentiles to salvation. God has called both Jews and Gentiles to be His people, and to support this Paul quotes the prophet Hosea (2:23; 1:10) to show that God can call and save people who previously were not His people (9:25-26).

The Hosea passages originally referred to the restoration of the tribes of Israel in the last days and not to Gentile salvation. Paul does not use these Hosea passages to show that Gentiles are now part of Israel or that the Hosea passages have been entirely fulfilled in the church. Instead,
he chooses a passage that illustrates clearly God’s election and calling of people who needed to be saved. By using Hosea, Paul is emphasizing the principle of election, not redefinition of the people of God. The fact that Paul continues to clearly distinguish believing Jews and Gentiles in Romans 9-11 (ex. Rom 11:12; 25-26) shows that Paul is not redefining Israel to include Gentiles.

Paul quotes a cluster of Old Testament texts, including Isa 10:22-23, to show that God will save a remnant of Israel and Israel will not be destroyed (9:27-29). Surprisingly, Gentiles who were not even pursuing righteousness found it, while Israel, who had all the privileges of God, did not. This is because many Gentiles have embraced Christ by faith while Israel as a whole continues to pursue righteousness by works of the Mosaic Law. Israel continues to stumble over Christ by not believing in Him for salvation, something the Old Testament predicted (9:30-33).

**Romans 10**

Paul again declares that He earnestly desires Israel’s salvation (10:1). Israel does have a zeal for God but this zeal is misplaced and not in accord with the truth (10:2). The Jews were seeking righteousness with God in the wrong way. They thought they could attain righteousness by keeping the Mosaic Law, when in reality righteousness can only be found in Jesus Christ who is the end or completion of the Law (10:3-4).

Paul then contrasts the attempt to be righteous by keeping the Law and the righteous that comes because of faith in Christ (10:5-11). Righteousness is for those who have faith in Christ, confessing that Jesus is Lord. This righteousness, which comes by faith, is equally available to both Jews and Gentiles (10:12-13). Having faith in Christ, though, means having knowledge of Christ; that is why the need for a preacher is necessary (10:14-15). Faith comes by hearing the Word of Christ, and this message is going throughout the world (10:16-18). Israel is obstinate for not having faith, but God is moving Israel to jealousy by saving Gentiles (10:19-21).

**Romans 11**

11:1-6

All of this stubbornness of Israel to God’s plan of righteousness should not be taken to mean that God has rejected Israel. After posing the question, “God has not rejected His people, has He?” Paul responds with an emphatic, “May it never be!” (11:1). He then says, “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew” (11:2). The strong language indicates the impossibility of God rejecting the nation Israel. Such thinking was absurd. The fact that Paul addresses this question appears to indicate that there were Gentiles who were thinking that God had rejected Israel. Thus, some form of replacement theology in regard to Israel may have been present.

Paul then offers a multi-faceted argument as to why Israel has not been rejected by God. First Paul appeals to a current remnant of unbelieving Jews which shows that Israel’s current hardening against God is only partial. Paul includes himself by pointing out that he is an Israelite who has believed (11:1). Second, Paul uses the argument from God’s election by declaring, “God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew” (11:2). In this context, “foreknew” refers to the choice of God to know and love Israel. It is a term related to election. God cannot reject Israel because He has chosen Israel. God cannot discard His electing purposes. Paul then flips
back to argument #1 by appealing to a remnant of faithful Jews who had not bowed their knees to Baal even though the rest of the nation had (11:2-6). This shows “there is a remnant according to God’s gracious choice.”

Again, Paul appeals to the OT to show that Israel’s stubbornness was nothing new and that God for a time was confirming Israel in its unbelief (11:7-10). Paul then addresses the issue of whether Israel’s current stumbling was permanent. The answer again is an emphatic, No—“May it never be!” (11:11). One purpose of Israel’s current unbelief is to bring salvation to Gentiles, and in doing so, to drive Israel to jealousy (11:11). Paul then contrasts Israel’s current “transgression” with a coming “fulfillment.” And in doing so shows that Israel’s current state of unbelief will be reversed with great positive ramifications for the world.

According to Paul, Israel’s current “transgression” and “failure” have brought “riches for the world” and “riches for the Gentiles (11:12). But these conditions will be greatly amplified when Israel’s “fullness” takes place (“how much more will their fulfillment be!). So not only is God not done with Israel. What is taking place now with the Gentiles is only a foretaste of what is to come when Israel’s fulfillment (i.e. conversion to Jesus) takes place. Paul does not say specifically what greater conditions will exist for Gentiles but when Israel is properly restored to God, greater blessings to the Gentile world will occur.

Paul then offers another ‘from lesser to greater’ argument. If Israel’s “rejection” now means “reconciliation of the world,” Israel’s “acceptance” in the future means “life from the dead.” Israel’s rebirth as a nation brings blessings to both Israel and the nations of the world. As great are the blessings to the world now, they will be even better in the future.

11:17-24
The relationship of Jews and Gentiles as the people of God is then illustrated by the example of the olive tree (11:17-24). The natural olive tree along with its rich root most likely refers to the place of blessing as found in the Abrahamic Covenant. The natural branches refer to Israel while the branches taken from a wild olive tree refer to Gentiles who have now become believers. When Paul says “some of the branches were broken off” (11:17) this means that unbelieving members of Israel have been removed from the place of blessing found in the Abrahamic Covenant. But Gentiles who are the branches from the wild olive have been “grafted in” to the place of blessing along with believing Jews (11:17).

But Paul issues a strong warning to Gentiles who now partake of the natural olive tree. They should not be “arrogant” against the natural branches, i.e. the Jews (11:18). Since the Jews were the vehicle for the Abrahamic Covenant, they are the ones who support the believing Gentiles, not the other way around. And since the Jews were at first organically related to the Abrahamic Covenant, God can easily graft them back in to the blessings of the promises to Abraham (11:24). This should be a warning against any form of “replacement theology” in which believing Gentiles see themselves as taking over Israel’s role.

To illustrate the relationship between Israel and Gentiles in the plan of God Paul uses the example of the olive tree. The olive tree illustration indicates both continuity and discontinuity in the people of God. By faith, both believing Jews and Gentiles are experiencing the blessings of
the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant originally promised that both Israel and the Gentiles would participate in this covenant (see Gen 12:2-3). Yet distinction exists as well. While both are related to the olive tree the natural branches are natural branches and the branches from the wild olive are still that of the wild olive. Or in other words, Israel is still Israel and Gentiles are still Gentiles. The wild olive branches do not become natural branches, nor do believing Gentiles become Jews. There is room in the Abrahamic Covenant for both believing Jews and believing Gentiles. Thus, the people of God involves the concepts of unity and diversity. Unity in salvation by faith in Christ, yet diversity in that these groups remain ethnically diverse (see Eph 3:6).

11:25-36
Paul’s third main argument for God not rejecting Israel is that the nation Israel will experience a national salvation. With verse 25, he reveals a “mystery,” i.e. a truth not found in the Old Testament. This mystery is that a “partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the gentiles has come in.” And when this fullness of the Gentiles has occurred then “all Israel will be saved” (11:26). This “mystery” is a new truth indeed. While the Old Testament predicted blessings to Gentiles as a result of Israel and an ultimate Israelite (Jesus) (see Isa 49:3-6), the OT did not explicitly state that great blessings to the Gentiles would precede the nation Israel’s blessings. Paul stated earlier that one of the purposes of Gentile salvation was to make Israel jealous. But when this period of the “fullness of the Gentiles” is completed, then “all Israel will be saved” (11:26). The “all Israel” refers to the nation Israel as a whole. It does not necessarily mean that every Jew living at the coming of the Messiah will be saved. This may be the reverse of what occurred at Jesus’ first coming. The nation Israel as a whole rejected Jesus the Messiah, but there were a minority of Jews who believed. At the time of Jesus’ coming, Israel as a whole will be saved, while individual Jews may and will reject Jesus at His second coming.

This prediction that “all Israel will be saved” is what the Old Testament explicitly predicted. Paul quotes Isa 59:20-21 and Jer 31:33-34, passages that predict the coming of the Redeemer and the New Covenant after a period of rebellion on Israel’s part. National Israel’s coming salvation, therefore, is strongly rooted in the Old Testament. Paul then links Israel’s place in God’s plans to God’s “choice” and because of God’s commitments to the patriarchs of Israel (11:28). If God were to dismiss or alter His plans for national Israel, He would have to violate His electing purposes and His promises to Israel’s patriarchs, something that cannot happen. Then Paul states that “the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29) to reaffirm that once God commits himself to someone or some group, it is impossible for Him to go back on His word. Thus, God cannot give up on national Israel because of His irrevocable calling of Israel.

Also, Gentiles should understand that just as they were shown mercy, God is able to show mercy again to Israel (11:30-31). Paul wraps up this important section of his letter to the Romans with an outburst of praise to God for His wonderful ways (11:33-36). God’s plans for Israel and Gentiles are truly marvelous!
Summary

The following points sum up the significance of the people of God in Romans 9-11:

1. Even with the coming of Jesus and the church, the nation Israel is still important to God and His plans.
2. There is no indication that the title “Israel” has been transferred to the church.
3. Israel is Israel and Gentiles are Gentiles. There is no indication that believing Gentiles are now “Israel.”
4. Israel’s current unbelief is a cause for sorrow.
5. Even in a state of unbelief the covenants, promises, and temple service are still the present possession of Israel (i.e. they have not been forfeited).
6. There is a true Israel which is composed of ethnic Jews who believe.
7. God sovereignly chooses and saves both Jews and Gentiles by faith.
8. Israel’s current rejection is because the nation rejected God’s plan for righteousness in Christ through faith and tried to establish its own righteousness by keeping the Mosaic Law.
9. God has not rejected Israel.
10. God cannot reject Israel because Israel foreknown and chosen by God.
11. Current evidence that God has not rejected Israel is the fact that a remnant of believing Jews, including Paul, exists.
12. God is using Gentile salvation to make Israel jealous.
13. While many Jews have been separated from the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant, God can bring Israel back into the place of blessing.
14. Both believing Jews and Gentiles as distinct people groups are currently in a state of blessing that stems from the Abrahamic Covenant.
15. There is a new truth that Gentiles will experience salvation blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant before the nation Israel is saved.
16. God’s calling of Israel is irrevocable.
17. God is faithful to Israel also because of what He promised to Israel’s patriarchs.