

JESUS, THE CHURCH, AND ETHNIC ISRAEL:
A CONCENTRIC APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING
THE FUTURE OF ISRAEL

Introduction

John Bright finishes his book *A History of Israel* with this statement, “Israel’s history leads straight to the Talmud—or the gospel. It has in fact no other direction.”¹ One of these ways is a dead end, while the other leads to life from the dead. One has a future, the other does not. The New Testament teaches the way that leads to life is in union with Jesus Christ by faith. This hope is the same for Jew and Gentile. Yet, is it that simple?

Christianity, which sprung from the loins of Israel, says that Jesus Christ serves as Israel’s long awaited Messiah, and that he is in fact the “terminus” of their history and the one who satisfies their eschatological hope “in all its variegated forms.”² Consequently, association with Jesus is the determining factor in the quality of hope one has in the future. However, scholars have debated the place of Israel in the program of God. Certainly, the history of Israel is settled, but what about the future?

Systematic Solutions Are Insufficient

Israel’s future has been a question that has challenged the church for centuries. As a result, various answers have been given, some better than others. Differing theological systems only increase the confusion. Dispensational theology asserts that a great hope remains for the

¹ John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 467.

² *Ibid.*, 467.

Jews.³ The millennial kingdom is in fact reserved for them, as Lewis and Demarest quote C. I. Scofield's comments on 1 Corinthians 15:24, "Upon his return, the King will restore the Davidic monarchy in His own person, re-gather dispersed Israel, establish his power over all the earth and reign one thousand years."⁴ When they rejected the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, he postponed their Kingdom by offering salvation to the Gentiles. Yet, their inheritance is not abandoned, and a time is coming and has been foretold when Israel will receive its earthly kingdom. In the mind of Dispensationalists then, their doctrine of last things is closely connected with the state of Israel.

In contrast, Reformed theologians understand Israel in a much different fashion. Instead of retaining a place for Israel in the future, they contend that Israel's future, hope, and inheritance was passed on to the church. Hard-line covenantalists argue that there is no hope for ethnic Israel, and that it was replaced by the church. Paul Boyer, quotes one such Reformed theologian as saying, "The New Testament church is the fulfillment of Old Testament Israel... To suggest that God has in mind a separate future for Israel... is like putting the scaffolding back up after the building has been finished."⁵

All of this talk about Israel leads the average Bible reader to an amalgamated theology. While Israel is often considered intrinsically important, exactly how and why this is so may not be seen. Much hype has been made over the state of Israel as a nation, and the

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1994), 860.

⁴ *The Scofield Reference Bible*, ed. C. I. Scofield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909/1917), note 1 Corinthians 15:24, 999-1000 in Gordon Lewis and Bruce DeMarest, *Integrative Theology: Spirit-Given Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 314.

⁵ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 187-193.

importance it plays in the fulfillment of prophecy;⁶ however, the importance of Israel is less political and more theological. Consequently, a correct view of Israel will help secure the believer's understanding of their place in God's program of salvation, and increase confidence in God's wisdom and faithfulness to carry out his promises to the world through Israel.

A Biblical Problem

The problem does not seem to go away by simply reading the Bible more comprehensively either, because some of the biblical authors actually seem to have differing perspectives on the future of Israel. Within only one gospel, Matthew gives the reader a mixed message about Israel. On the one hand, Jesus' mission demonstrates particularism and salvific favor toward the Jews, but on the other, the author seems to include a universalizing principle that takes the gospel outside the bounds of Abraham's descendents.⁷ So the reader is left to wonder, is Matthew for or against the Jews.⁸

Looking at other New Testament authors only diffuses the light further. In First Peter, the apostle assigned Israelite nomenclature to the church and references Hosea 2:23, an explicit referent to Israel in the prophet's book, to authenticate the church as God's people (1 Peter 2:9-10). Luke, in the book of Acts, appears to thematically reject the unbelieving Jewish people and ostensibly transfer all privileges of the covenant community to the church.⁹ Yet in Romans, Paul takes care to give the most explicit treatment of Israel's future when he says in Romans 11:26,

⁶ Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 187-193. See also Elmer A. Josephson, *Israel: God's Key to World Redemption* (Hillsboro, KS: Bible Light Publication, 1974), *passim*.

⁷ Thomas Schreiner, "Distinctives in Matthew's Theology" (classroom lecture, 27800—*New Testament Theology*, April 12, 2006).

⁸ For a discussion of this issue, see Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 102-105.

⁹ David Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus* (Tubingen: Mohr Seibek, 2000), PAGE NUMBER

“all Israel will be saved.” Still, even this statement must be qualified. Who does Paul have in mind when he says “Israel?” When will this happen?

This preliminary sketch of a few New Testament writers stirs up more problems than it solves. All of these questions lead to an analysis that must be nuanced with precise definitions and carefully crafted qualifications. Likewise, a willingness to concede some points as ambiguous may also be necessary. In any case, the question remains, “What is the future of Israel?”

To answer that question, another question must be posed, “Which Israel do you mean?” There are, as it will be shown, differing kinds of hope for Israel, depending on how one draws Israel’s boundaries. This paper will eventually seek to answer the question concerning ethnic Israel, but first it must define Israel in terms of Jesus Christ, the true Israelite, and the church, the new Israel. Only then can it answer the future hope of ethnic Israel.

Looking through the eyes of three New Testament writers (Matthew, Luke, and Paul), it is the goal of this paper to show the eschatological hope of Jesus as Israel, the church as Israel, and ethnic Israel as Israel. This will not give an exhaustive answer to the question, but it should provide a helpful schematic to help understand Israel in its three primary forms. Beginning in Matthew, it will be asserted that there is a present and future hope for Israel in the person of Jesus Christ. Assessing the book of Acts, it will be demonstrated how in relationship to Jesus Christ, the church also has a present and future hope, as the people of God, the fulfillment of Israel. Then it will be shown in Romans 11 how a future hope for ethnic Israel remains, but only as they embrace Jesus Christ as their messianic savior. By looking at these books in turn, Israel can be understood in a three-fold schematic that retains a Messianic hope for ethnic Israel.

A Concentric Approach to Understanding Israel's Eschatological Hope

Jewish Dispensationalist, Arnold Fruchtenbaum's massive volume *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* spans more than 1000 pages.¹⁰ This is noteworthy only because it shows how much can be said about Israel biblically and theologically. Much can be said qualitatively about Israel as well, for when Paul writes, "not all Israel is Israel," scores of linguistic and theological questions arise begging qualification.

Accordingly in a discussion about Israel, definitions must be the starting place. Despite attempts by many Dispensationalists to press the term Israel to mean "ethnic, national Israel" in every New Testament usage, the term itself has a variety of meanings.¹¹ So to answer the question of Israel's future, it will be helpful to begin by showing how a concentric ring of meanings can be attached to Israel, in particular in answering the question who is Israel.

Jesus Christ as Israel

Jesus, the son of Abraham, son of David (Matthew 1:1) is the only Jewish descendent to perfectly fulfill the law and rightly keep the covenant. Where Israel failed, he succeeded. While Israel was tempted in the desert, Jesus maintained faith in God by refusing to complain and fighting against the schemes of the devil with the powerful word of God (Matt. 4:1-11). Likewise, as Jesus completed his mission as the Suffering Servant, a term that was used

¹⁰ Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1989), vii.

¹¹ Compare Carl Hoch's appendix, "The Term Israel in the New Testament," which painstakingly details the way "Israel" maintains its meaning as the ethnic nation throughout all of the New Testament (Carl B. Hoch, Jr., *All Things New: The Significance of Newness for Biblical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995], 263-317) with Lewis and DeMarest's systematic theology which gives a more succinct explanation of Israel's meaning in terms of its spiritual and institutional usage (Gordon Lewis and Bruce DeMarest, *Integrative Theology: Spirit-Given Life* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], 336-342).

corporately of Israel, Jesus embodied all that Israel should have been but was not.¹²

Matthew orders the beginning of his gospel with Old Testament citations and allusions, and he starts with a genealogy which qualifies Jesus for the blessings of Abraham and the throne of David (Matthew 1:1-17). Next, Matthew recounts the narrative of the virgin birth and the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, “Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (Matthew 1:18-25). Jesus Israelite heritage and divinely appointed Sonship (cf. Luke 3:38) is unmistakable after only one chapter.

Matthew follows this with the visitation of Jesus by wise men from the east who worship him and bring him gifts fit for a king (Matt. 2:1-12). Jesus’ family then flees Palestine to take refuge in Egypt (Matt. 2:13-15). From Christ’s early infancy, Matthew draws a nativity-story connection between Jesus and Israel quoting Hosea 11:1, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” It seems apparent that Matthew is seeking to link Jesus with Israel, as Robert Mounce comments, “Matthew interprets the Christ child as the embodiment or representation of the true Israel.”¹³

C.J.H. Wright also finds this theme in his book, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*. Wright demonstrates how Matthew associates Jesus with Israel. He writes, “by taking a text which describes Israel as God’s son...and applying it to Jesus, Matthew is obviously also setting up a Jesus-Israel correspondence.”¹⁴ This correspondence is amplified in chapter Matthew 4, as Jesus is led out into the wilderness for 40 days, just like Israel wandered in the wilderness for 40 years. The difference comes in that while Israel was tested in the desert, ultimately failing and perishing, Jesus the true Israel contended with the devil, returned

¹² Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 96-97.

¹³ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 17.

¹⁴ Christopher J.H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through The Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 62-63.

victorious, and procured eternal life.¹⁵ Furthermore, Vaughan Roberts sees the recruitment of twelve apostles as another picture of Christ establishing himself as the New Israel, patterning himself after the twelve tribes of Israel.¹⁶

Finding further support in other portions of the New Testament is not difficult. The apostle John also points to Jesus as the true Israel of God. Peter Leithart devotes a whole chapter, entitled “Israel Dead and Reborn,”¹⁷ in his book *A House For My Name* to retelling “the story of Jesus [as] the last chapter of Israel.”¹⁸ Leithart demonstrates how John finds so much of Israel consummated in Christ. In one instance, John shows Jesus to be greater than the temple and its first-century forms of worship when he records the cleansing of the temple by Jesus.¹⁹ This prelude to the forthcoming destruction of the temple symbolized that God’s presence which formerly dwelt with Israel now tabernacled within Jesus Christ, God’s true Israel (John 1:14).

More specifically, 2 Corinthians 1:20 says, “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him [Jesus Christ].” Considering the fact that all of these promises were given originally to Israel, it logically follows that only someone in the place of Israel could rightly be said to possess the promises of God. Graeme Goldsworthy agrees with these assertions when he writes, “in the Old Testament, the key offices that represent the people were prophet, priest, king and wise man. In reading the New Testament it becomes obvious that the various writers understood the person

¹⁵ Vaughan Roberts, *God’s Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 111.

¹⁶ Roberts, *God’s Big Picture*, 111.

¹⁷ Peter Leithart, *A House For My Name: A Survey of the Old Testament* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2000), 241-263.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 252-253.

and work of Jesus to be fulfilling these roles.”²⁰ Thus it seems fair to deduce that if Jesus Christ perfectly fulfills these roles that he is in fact truly Israel.²¹

Jesus greatest association with Israel may be the way that he fulfilled the promise of Israel’s resurrection from the dead in Ezekiel 37:11-14. When Jesus died and rose again, he showed the world not only his victory over death, sin’s curse, but also the hope of everyone who has put trust in the one who perfectly obeyed the law and was honorably justified by being raised from the dead.

Jesus as Israel has an incredible future. God has promised to him a kingdom and glory for all eternity. Though offered these things illicitly by the devil while on earth (Matt. 4:8-9), Jesus’ perfectly patient obedience earned these things, so that he might come and establish his kingdom on this earth with all those his blood redeemed (Matt. 25:31ff). Philippians 2:9-11 says, “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.” This is the future hope of Jesus, accomplished by “taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:7-8). Therefore, it can be concluded that there is great hope for the “Son of Man,” who is the beloved son of God, who did all that the Father required. His eternal reward is to reign

²⁰ Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991), 205.

²¹ Additional authors who acknowledge Christ as Israel include: Graeme Goldsworthy, *According to Plan: The Unfolding Revelation of God in the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991); Russell Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004); Christopher J.H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through The Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992); Vaughan Roberts, *God’s Big Picture: Tracing the Storyline of the Bible* (Downers Grove IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2002).

with his people for eternity, in perfect harmony with them and his Father.

The Church as Israel

With the center fixed on Jesus as the True Israel, an understanding of an eschatological community can be advanced. While all of the eschatological promises made to Israel now rest in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20), it logically follows that all those who have placed their faith in him also have access to these promised blessings. This leads to the second understanding of Israel then, that all that “belong to Christ are a part of true Israel.”²² For how can the bride have a different last name than the groom? If Christ, the husband, is Israel, than the church his wife, must share his name. Therefore, the church is ‘in Israel’ by relation to its husband and head Jesus Christ.

Conclusively, this looks like a restatement of the classic reformed doctrine that the church is spiritual Israel, however it should be noted that this definition is far more Christocentric.²³ The Church did not replace Israel, so much as it became the *telos* of Israel. Had all of national Israel rightly obeyed and followed Yahweh, the membership of the church would have been coterminous with the descendents of Abraham. Instead, the nation of Israel splintered and formed a “divided people,”²⁴ where only the believing remnant became the church, the faithful community of God. Luke records in Acts just how this happened.²⁵

²² Thomas Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 483.

²³ A classical reformed understanding of the Church as spiritual Israel can be found in Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 196-201.

²⁴ Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 34-43.

²⁵ Consideration for Luke's program of the church's formation in Acts will help establish the church as Israel, while demonstrating how God cut off the unbelieving majority in Israel. By the end of Acts, it appears as

Acts begins with a homogenously Jewish “church.” Yet, within twenty-eight chapters the people of God are transformed from a Jewish sect centered in Jerusalem to a Gentile religion anchored in Rome.²⁶ David Pao titles this process of Israel’s identity change as the “redefinition of Israel.”²⁷ In his book, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, he shows how Luke uses the terminology and themes of Isaiah to prove that the church is God’s new creation. Just as Isaiah saw a new people of God following the way (Is. 40:3; 43:16-19; 44:26-27; 51:9-11), Luke proffers a new group not coincidentally distinguished as the “Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22).²⁸ This new people would not be based on heredity or national origins, it would be based upon faith in Jesus as the Messiah.²⁹

So, while the color of the people of God was changing in Acts, the content was not; and at least three things became apparent about this group to prove their status as God’s people. First, they all received the Holy Spirit. Second, they came to faith by believing the Word of God. Third, their faith is placed in Jesus the Christ. Tracing these characteristics of the church in Acts will show how the church fulfilled New Exodus and New Creation promises.

Acts recounts the multi-staged arrival of the Spirit to the Jews during Pentecost (2), to the Samaritans after John and Peter, with their apostolic authority, arrived to witness the baptism of the Spirit (8), and to the Gentiles in correlation with Peter’s preaching (10). In Acts 2,

though no hope remains for Israel. It must be remembered that his account is merely descriptive and not declarative for what hope may actually remain for Israel. Israel’s future is in peril, needing a more systematic explanation of any future they may or may not have. Paul provides this in Romans. Before going to Paul though, it must be seen how in Acts how the faithful remnant of Israel evolves into a multi-ethnic community of eschatological hope.

²⁶ Willem VanGemenen, *The Progress of Redemption: The Story of Salvation from Creation to the New Jerusalem* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 397.

²⁷ Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 52

²⁸ Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 52.

²⁹ This is evident in the selection of Matthias in Acts 1. His selection was not based on his Jewish genes, but upon his association with Jesus since the beginning (Acts 1:21-22).

tongues of fire, representative of God's presence, came and rested on those in Jerusalem waiting for the Holy Spirit (Ex. 40:38; Neh. 9:12, 19).³⁰ Following this initial outpouring in Jerusalem, the Spirit in the same manner (Acts 11:17; 15:8-9) went forth to demarcate the people of God.

The significance of the Holy Spirit is that it was a gift promised to Israel. It was part and parcel of the New Covenant specifically pledged to Israel (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:22-32). It seems clearly defined that the people of God are those who have the Spirit. Jervell concurs, "Where the Spirit is, there is the people of God. It has always been so in the history of Israel."³¹ The Spirit's arrival created a new people, spiritual Israel. Unlike before, these born again believers had power to obey the law and keep the covenant, and thus they became God's new creation based not physical birth, but spiritual birth.

Luke's emphasis on the activity of the Spirit is complemented by his insistence on the law of Israel and the Old Testament Scriptures. As Jervell puts it, "The question of the law is a burning problem to [Luke]...for it has to do with the identity of the church."³² Luke venerates the law greatly and characterizes the church as a law-abiding people. This can be seen in a verse like Acts 24:14 where Paul stands before Felix and a host of Jewish elders and says, "But this I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets." In short, God's true followers did not depart from Israel's legal heritage. They, instead, became the greatest advocates of the law. The church, not the Jews, went forth in obedience to God's word, so that, in the end, obedience to and possession of God's word rested with the church, not national Israel.

³⁰Richard N. Longenecker, *Acts*, in vol. 9 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein and J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 270.

³¹Jacob Jervell, *The Theology of the Acts of the Apostles*, 43.

³² Jacob Jervell, *Theology of the Acts of the Apostles*, 54.

The third item shared by all those marked out as the people of God in Acts is the witness of Jesus as the Christ. Jesus is himself the dividing line for those who are in Israel and those who are not. For if Jesus Christ is the “true Israel,”³³ it would be only natural that those who have placed faith in him would also be in Israel. Incorporation into Israel becomes dependent not on one’s heritage in Israel, but in one’s relationship to Jesus.

Luke demonstrates this throughout Acts. In Acts 2, Luke records the first speech of Peter and the amazing response of 3000 believing Jews repenting and being baptized. Interestingly, no record of resistance is found in this truly Pentecostal sermon. However, in the following chapter (3:12-4:4), Peter’s message is met with mixed results. There are some who believe (Acts 4:4), but there are others who reject Jesus as the Christ. The Israelite hierarchy opposes the message of Jesus and his resurrection (4:2), and arrests Peter and his companions (4:3). These witnesses are brought before the Jewish law court and asked to stop proclaiming Jesus (4:5-22). This is just the beginning of Luke’s description of the many ways Christ divides Israel. In Acts 5, the apostles are arrested again, and by Acts 7 the fury of the Jewish rulers, elders, and scribes is seen in the murder of Stephen. Saul’s hatred for “the way” is seen in Acts 8:1-3 as he proactively ravages Christian homes.

Ironically, after Saul’s conversion, this rejection of Jesus Christ is perpetuated in the missionary journeys of the very same apostle. Luke makes it a point to record Paul’s faithfulness in taking the message of Jesus first to the Jews and then to the Gentiles. In city after city, Paul’s custom was to go to the Jews in the synagogue and then to the Gentiles (Acts 17:2). Without fail Paul’s presence and proclamation was invariably rejected by the Jewish elders and often resisted

³³For more on the idea of Christ as “true Israel,” see Russell Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ*, 117-120; Peter Leithart, *A House for my Name: A Survey of the Old Testament* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1998), 241-264; and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*, 61-64.

with physical violence. This was the case in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13:13-52), Iconium (14:1-7); Lystra (14:8-23), Thessalonica (17:1-9), Berea (17:10-13), Corinth (18:1-17), and Ephesus (19:8-10). Moreover, the final eight chapters of Acts show the unwavering unbelief of the Jews, as they unwarrantedly arrest Paul in the temple (21:27-36), make allegations against him for preaching Christ to the Gentiles (23:30-23:10), plan his assassination (23:12-23), contend against him in Roman courts (24:1-25:12), and leave him in custody of a pagan nation (25:13ff). As George Ladd summarizes in his *New Testament Theology*, “The purpose of this long recital [where ‘no new churches were established, no theological or ecclesiastical problems solved’] is to illustrate in detail how Judaism rejected the gospel.”³⁴ Luke seems to show from the beginning to the end of Acts that unbelieving Jews had truly stumbled over the rock of Christ.

All of this evidence supports a Biblical understanding of the church as Israel. This is only reinforced all the more when compared with passages like Galatians 3:29 which teaches that those in Christ are also Abraham’s offspring; Galatians 6:16 which asserts that all who are new creations (6:15) are a part of the Israel of God;³⁵ Ephesians 2:11-22 which reconciles Jews and Gentiles and then assembles both as living stones in temple of God; and 1 Peter 2:9-10 which applies technical terms for Israel as descriptors of a multi-ethnic church.

Yet while there are many reasons to believe that the true people of God, the Church, is being carved out of Israel in Acts, a corollary pattern of Israelite rejection is also observable. Luke cites the Old Testament with great frequency, but his use of the Old Testament is not for shoring up weak arguments with ancient proof texts. His interrelated quotations, especially of Isaiah, show just how the people of Israel turned a deaf ear and a blind eye to their Messiah.

³⁴ George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 393.

³⁵ For a defense of this position see Thomas Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God’s Glory in Christ*, 482-83.

Comparing the Luke-Acts narrative with the program of redemption found in Isaiah, Pao shows how Luke-Acts reverses Isaiah 6 and Isaiah 40.³⁶ In the third chapter of his gospel, Luke quotes Isaiah 40:3-5 to explain the ministry of John the Baptist:

“The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall become straight, and the rough places shall become level ways, and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

Then in Acts 28, Luke concludes his writing by quoting Isaiah 6:9-10, a passage that tells of the spiritual climate of the people which Isaiah will be ministering. Luke excerpts:

Go to this people, and say, You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive. For this people’s heart has grown dull, and with their ears they can barely hear, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears and understand with their heart and turn, and I would heal them.’

According to Pao, Luke’s choice of these poignant texts is to provocatively illustrate the way God’s blessing to Israel has been exchanged for a curse. He says, “The Isaianic scheme of ‘judgment-salvation’ as represented by Isaiah 6 and 40 has been reversed. In the very beginning of the Lukan program, salvation is announced through the use of Isaiah 40:3-5. At the end of the Lukan writings, however, the theme of judgment is climatically announced through the use of Isaiah 6:9-10.”³⁷ Pao continues by drawing attention to the visual metaphors in both passages. He says, “In Luke 3:6 there is the announcement that all will ‘see’ the salvation of God, in Acts 28:27 one reads that the eyes of the people of God are closed.”³⁸ Thus the contrast is exposed. In Isaiah, the prognosis starts out dire but moves towards restoration. The opposite is true with Dr. Luke’s evaluation. The hope begins with Christ’s advent, but by the end of Acts,

³⁶ David Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 105-109.

³⁷ David Pao, *Acts and the Isaianic New Exodus*, 108.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 108.

the nation of Israel has forsaken Jesus Christ, and no hope remains. Thus the impending forecast is bleak, because the nation of God failed to receive the son of God, and therefore turned down the chance to remain God's people. Instead, believing individuals in the church retained the right to call themselves children of God.

The hope then for the church is in union with Jesus Christ. In Christ, they possess "every spiritual blessing" (Eph. 1:3). As Hebrews 4:14-16 and 10:19-23 teach, the believer now has high priestly access to the presence of God, and as John's gospel asserts this intimacy is denoted as abundant and eternal life (John 10:10; 17:3). More eschatological in nature, the believer has no fear of death (1 Cor. 15:54-55); no concern for shame at the judgment seat of God (Rom. 10:11), and only hope of receiving an eternal inheritance for God with the saints (Rom. 8:17; Eph. 1:18; 2:7). Just as he is reigning and resting at the right hand of God (Heb. 1:3), those who are in Christ have the hope of reigning with him (Eph. 2:6; Rev. 20:6; 22:5). More corporate in nature, the church also has the assurance of a marriage with the one who died to forgive their sins (Eph. 5:22-32; Rev. 19:6-10), as wedding and feasting imagery plays a profound role in describing the coming of the New Heavens and New Earth (Matt. 22:1-14; 25:1-10; Rev. 21:2). In all of these blessed promises, the church finds hope in the God of Israel, and she herself as the *telos* of Israel.

Ethnic Israel as Israel

Based on Acts alone, a premature conclusion might be that the future of Israel is non-existent, that hope only lies in Jesus Christ and the community of believers that is presently united with him. Certainly, this is true, but according to Romans 11 there still remains a "mysterious" future for the nation of Israel, an eschatological hope that by necessity finds its salvation in Christ, but one that may not be seen without the sovereign guidance of an all-wise

God. The historiography of Acts indicates the woeful trajectory of Israel and if left alone its inevitable demise, but Paul's instructive letter to the Romans shows how God is not entirely finished with the nation of Israel.

Paul's letter to the Roman church is the most full and clear presentation of the doctrine of salvation in the Bible. It is a masterpiece of logical, polemic, and systematic theology. Yet, the original function of Romans, like many of Paul's letters, was to settle a congregational dispute. Written to a predominantly Gentile church struggling with issues of unity amidst a racially mixed congregation, Frank Thielman writes convincingly, "the Romans needed to hear the gospel again...[because] the Gentile Christians in Rome, who were in the position of power, seem to have succumbed to an anti-Jewish sentiment toward both believing and unbelieving Jews."³⁹ Only the power of the gospel (Rom. 1:16) will enable these diverse groups of believers to glorify God together (Rom. 15:6).

With this context in mind, it can be seen how Paul unfolds the gospel with intentions of reconciling Jews and Gentiles. For instance, Paul begins his argument in Romans 1:18-3:20 by leveling both parties as sinners before God. "All [Jews and Gentiles] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," therefore "every mouth may be stopped and the whole world may be accountable to God" (Rom. 3:23, 19). Following this course, Paul explains the way of salvation in chapters 4-8; and in chapters 9-11, he delineates the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in God's program of salvation. He discloses the particular mercy of God in saving elect individuals in Romans 9:1-29. He explains "the nature of Israel's present failure" to receive the promises of God by faith in Romans 9:30-10:21.⁴⁰ And in Romans 11, Paul explains how God has faithfully

³⁹ Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 343.

⁴⁰ Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 368.

kept his promise to the Jews by not rejecting them.

The chapter begins with a sympathetic appeal to God concerning the condition of Israel. Paul writes, “Has God rejected his people?” His response is emphatically, “By no means” (11:1). In the wisdom of God, he has a plan of salvation for his people.

In Romans 11:1-10, he shows how God is currently working to save for himself a remnant of Jews. Paul writes, “I myself am an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin” (v. 1). He insinuates, that since he himself is an Israelite saved by God, there is hope for others. He extends this hope by alluding to an incident in Israel’s history.

When Elijah battled with the prophets of Baal and felt as though he was the only follower of Yahweh remaining, God reminded him that he had retained a remnant of “seven thousand men who had not bowed the knee to Baal” (11:4). In a similar fashion, the God of Israel has preserved for himself a remnant from Israel to be saved, and just as the gospel is going to the nations, the gospel is still spreading in and among the descendents of Abraham.

The issue at hand here, as in Romans 9, is the sovereignty of God in salvation. All those who God has foreknown will be saved,⁴¹ because salvation is ultimately decide by God, not men. Paul writes, “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew” (Rom. 11:2). While it may appear as though God is turning his back on Israel, all those in Israel that God set out to redeem, he has effectively saved. Paul argues for the veracity of God’s promises to Israel.⁴²

The nature and scope of God’s salvation is seen in these verses as well. Never has all of Israel been saved (Rom. 9:6). Rather, it has always and only been a minority remnant. All

⁴¹ See S. M. Baugh’s chapter on foreknowledge for a detailed explanation of this idea in *Still Sovereign: Contemporary Perspectives on Election, Foreknowledge, and Grace*, ed. Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 183-200.

⁴² For more on this see Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament*, 367-370.

this highlights the graciousness of God, for Paul continues, “So too at this present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace” (11:5), these are the ones of Israel who are being saved currently. So the first way that Paul answers the question of Israel’s future is to say that there remains a band of believing Jews who presently possess an eschatological hope which displays His grace and proves in part God’s faithfulness to Israel.

Next, Paul turns to speak about corporate Israel in 11:11-32—a subject more germane to the discussion here—who unlike Paul have not placed faith in Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah. Is there any hope for them? Paul poses this question in Romans 11:11, when he asks of the final result of Israel’s Messianic denial, “Did they stumble in order that they might fall?”

In order to get at what Paul means by this question, the terms “stumble” and “fall” must be defined. The first word *eptaisan*, “stumble,” imply means to stumble in a way that allows for recovery.⁴³ The second word *pesosin*, “fall,” in this context carries the connotation that the fall is unchangeable. “The word is used here of a completely irrevocable fall—‘to fall to rise no more’—as the sprawling on one’s face puts a runner out of the race.”⁴⁴ Thus Paul is essentially asking, is there any hope remaining for Israel? What is the *telos* of this fall?

His answer is absolutely not! In conjunction with this strong negative reply, Paul follows with at least four reasons why hope remains for Israel. As he explains how Israel’s “partial hardening” led to the salvation of the Gentile world, he also shows how hope remains for what may look like an abandoned people. Through the remainder of Romans 11, there is ample support for believing a future remains for Israel.

⁴³ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary Series*, ed. D.A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 406.

⁴⁴ Cleon L. Rogers, Jr. and Cleon L. Rogers III, *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 336.

First, even though Israel transgressed against God and failed to receive the riches promised to them in Christ, there remains a future inclusion of Israel in God's plan (11:12). As Paul explains the hope of salvation gained by the Gentiles at the Jews expense in vv. 11-12, he concludes the passage with the promise of even greater riches for the world when the "full inclusion" of Israel occurs. Romans 11:15 says something similar, "For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead?"

It is hard to know what greater riches are foretold in 11:12, or what "life from the dead" means in 11:15, but certainly both of these seem to have hints of eschatological fulfillment. "Life from the dead" certainly gives a word picture of resurrection, and it might be possible, that a future inclusion of Israel might come at or around the time of the resurrection. By placing the Jews rejection of Christ at the beginning of the church age and their acceptance at the end, it would make history very symmetrical. Likewise, the greater riches in 11:12 may also be found at a time associated with the return of Christ, the renewal of this world, the bodily regeneration of the redeemed. Yet, from these passages only, absolute certainty cannot be gained. In any case, it can be strongly held from Paul's teaching here, that as the world benefited from Israel's transgression, they will be more richly blessed by their obedience.⁴⁵

Second, Paul magnifies his ministry to the Gentiles in order that the Jews might be provoked to jealousy and be saved (11:13-14). Paul, it can be assumed, sees the salvation of the Gentiles as an end in itself. Still, he sees that this ministry may in fact lead his own people, the Jews, to salvation and so he is spurred on to proclaim Christ all the more to the Gentiles, so that

⁴⁵ The efficiency of God's program of salvation absolutely amazing. When Israel rejected the Messiah, an opening for salvation came to the Gentiles (Rom. 11:11). This transferal of blessing to the Gentiles caused great jealousy in the hearts of the Jews (11:11, 14). Ironically, this jealousy which was originally caused by the Jews is actually the stimulus Paul hopes will bring some Jews back to faith in Jesus Christ. Thus, the very jealousy caused by Jewish resistance will in time prompt Jewish repentance in other descendents of Abraham. So, it could be argued that the transgression of Israel promoted a double salvation—1) directly for Gentile, and 2) indirectly and circuitously for Jews. What a wise God we serve!

Jews might be saved. Realistically, this motivation would be squelched were there not a genuine future for Israel.

Third, Paul in his illustration of the olive tree, calls Israel the “natural branches” (11:21, 24). Such a name shows the affinity that Israel has for the ways of God, and the ease by which they could be grafted back into the olive tree.⁴⁶ “If they [Israel] do not continue in their unbelief, [they] will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you [Gentiles] 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” (11:23-24). The only thing keeping Israel from being grafted back into the olive tree is their unbelief, and if they would repent and return to the Lord they would again find a place in God’s vineyard.

Fourth, most compelling are the words recorded in Romans 11:25-26, “I want you [Gentiles] to understand 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.” Looking at this passage it can be seen from the adjective “partial” used of Israel’s “hardening,” that the condition of Israel is not total; and based upon the what has been said previously in this chapter the hardening is not final. In fact, even the term “partial” may connote a meaning of temporality, as will be demonstrated in the following discussion. Still, the greatest reason for hope in this passage is the explicit statement that “all Israel will be saved.”

Many explanations have been advanced for the meaning of this important phrase. For the sake of brevity, this paper will follow the arguments laid out by Thomas Schreiner in his

⁴⁶ For they are the people who possess the oracles of God (Rom. 3:2) and have received an irrevocable promise (Rom. 11:29). Thus while not believing in Jesus, they have the background necessary to come to faith. That is, as Paul writes to Timothy, they possess the Scriptures that make one wise for salvation (2 Tim. 3:15-16).

commentary on Romans.⁴⁷ In the discussion about this phrase, three primary explanations have been given. They are seen in the questions posed by Schreiner, “1) Does [all Israel] refer to all Jews without exception who ever lived? 2) To the remnant of Jews who trust Christ for salvation [throughout the ages]? 3) To Jews at the end of history who trust Christ for salvation?”⁴⁸

Concerning the first question, it must be affirmed that there is no salvation outside of Christ. In regards to assertions that this passage teaches that Jews from every age will be saved, it seems that this inclusion is too great.⁴⁹ If this were the case, Paul would have no reason to even belabor the questions he has asked in Romans 11:1, 11 because all Israel would already have the promise of salvation. Moreover, all of his concern for his kinsmen is rooted in their separation from Christ (Rom. 9:3, 32; 11:7-11). Again, if Jews throughout the centuries did not actually need to come to God through Christ, then Paul was wasting his words. However, the truth is that just as Paul had to come to faith through Christ (Acts 9), all Jews must come to faith in Christ in order to be saved.

The second option, though possible, does not comport with the thrust of Romans 11, and the picture of branches being grafted back into the olive tree (Rom. 11:23-24). Schreiner writes, “the olive tree concludes with the expectation that the severed Jews will run back to Christ in faith. Verses 25 and 26 point to the same conclusion. The present era can be described as one in which a partial hardening has come upon Israel while the fullness of the Gentiles has

⁴⁷ Thomas Schreiner, *Romans in Baker’s Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, ed. Moise Silva (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 611-623. While many arguments rage over what “all Israel” means, the majority of scholars are in agreement that “all Israel” does not mean every single person in the group. Rather it is a linguistic device to denote that a majority of Israel will be saved, or that “Israel will be saved as a people.” (Schreiner 615)

⁴⁸ Schreiner, *Romans*, 615

⁴⁹ Schreiner lists F. Mussner, J. G. Gager, L. Gaston, S. K. Stowers, and J. Jocz as some of the scholars who maintain that salvation for the Jews comes apart from Christ (Schreiner, *Romans*, 616).

come in.”⁵⁰ It seems reasonable to conclude that “all Israel” cannot be retrospective, but only prospective with a future vision of a Jewish multitude being grafted back into God’s Olive Tree.

Third and last, the strongest interpretation of “all Israel” is given by looking at the contextual surroundings. Thus, it seems most likely to conclude that the Israel in focus in 11:26 is one comprised of only Jews. Schreiner comments, “to posit that the term “Israel” includes believing Gentiles in verse 26 requires that Paul lurches to a new meaning for the term “Israel” in verse 26...[For] it is obvious in verse 25 that the term “Israel” refers to ethnic Israel in contradistinction to the Gentiles.”⁵¹ This is further supported by the larger context of Romans 9-11 that speaks of Paul’s concern for his brethren according to the flesh (Rom. 9:3, 30-31; 10:1; 11:1, 28-29). The issue at hand is whether or not ethnic Israel will in the end be saved, and here in this passage Paul speaking about Israel in the flesh, says yes they will be saved.

Still, it remains to be answered when will this happen. Though Paul does give some significant events that will transpire before and at the time of the Jewish inclusion, it seems that “all Israel will be saved” when God removes their “spirit of stupor” and enlightens their darkened eyes (11:8-10), when “the Deliverer will come from Zion” to “banish ungodliness from Jacob, and...take away their sins” (11:26-27). When will this happen? It will transpire as soon as “the fullness of the Gentiles comes in” (11:25). When the fullness of the Gentiles has come to faith, it will occur that nation of Israel will also come to faith. It will be at this time that God’s mercy will be extended and once rebellious Jews will be readmitted into a relationship with their covenant-keeping God. Through the divine work of God to supernaturally quicken dead hearts and illuminate blind eyes, God will make sure at the end of the age that “all Israel will be saved.”

⁵⁰ Schreiner, *Romans*, 615.

⁵¹ Schreiner, *Romans*, 615.

Israel's Messianic Hope

What then is the eschatological hope of ethnic Israel? To begin with, their hope is does not rest in their birthright or in their ethnic heritage. Nor, is optimism to be gleaned from their religious convictions or commitments. In reality, they are a people hardened by unbelief, under the influence of Satan (John 8:44; 2 Cor. 4:4), without hope and without God in the world. Though they are a people not without truth, for they possess, at least in part, the oracles of God; and though they are a people not without promise, for God's promises to Israel still stand. They are a people who has corporately denied the Messiah, whom the God of their forefathers sent.

So what is the hope of Israel? The hope of Israel is the same as that of the church. It is union with Christ. Only by returning to Christ does Israel have a hope of reconciliation with God. Jesus Christ is the True Israel. He alone has completely obeyed the covenant laid down by God. He alone is a "brother" who has come and righteously governed the people (Deut. 17:14-20). He alone has rightly proclaimed and obeyed the law of God. He alone has served as a sinless high priest to intercede for the people. And he alone is the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). Anyone who stands outside of Jesus, consequently stands outside of Israel.

This has been demonstrated in Matthew, in the way Jesus identified with and superceded Israel. Everywhere Israel failed, he succeeded. Thus, it followed in Acts that Jews and Gentiles who placed faith in this true Israelite entered into the church of Jesus Christ creating the covenant community of God. Again, the dividing line of Israel became ones evaluation and acceptance of Jesus Christ. Finally, it was shown from Romans 11 that a hope remains, and is promised by God for Israel, but this hope is found in Jesus Christ alone. All those found outside of him, will equivocally be found outside of Israel; and as it has been promised since the beginning only the sons of Israel will inherit the blessing of God.

Thus today, those promises and blessings are given to one true Israelite, who then shares these gracious benefits with his friends (John 15:15). Today, ethnic Israel is an enemy of God for the sake of the Gentiles inclusion, but a day is coming and may soon be here, when their enmity will be replaced with unity, and “all Israel will be saved.” Their eyes will be opened and they will gladly bow the knee to their King, Jesus Christ, and consequently enter into the blessings of the new covenant by faith in Him. This is the future hope for ethnic Israel.

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