Israel: an Unbelieving People, ***by Steve Lehrer*** , 12 pgs
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One of the most confused areas in evangelical theology today concerns **the place and standing of the nation of Israel** in Scripture. **Covenant Theologians** teach that Israel is continuous with the church in the NT and that the major change we see in Scripture is the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God in the New Covenant era. On the other hand, **Dispensationalists** teach that God has two faithful peoples of Israel, and the church. Both theological systems are in error in the way they view the nation of Israel. **New Covenant Theology** teaches that Israel is a picture of an unbelieving people of God and (except for the remnant of Israelites who actually believed) the individuals of that nation received God's judgment. **The uniform teaching of Scripture is that the nation of Israel was never a believing people as a whole**.

The History of Israel

The nation of Israel is first established through the sons of Jacob and really comes into its own in Egypt under the tyrannical shadow of the Pharaoh. Its beginning was tenuous but God caused them to be fruitful and became their deliverer through Moses.

The Exodus Generation

After delivering the Israelites out of the hands of Pharaoh, God made certain that they did not enter the promised land because of their rebellion. Are we to understand this punishment as merely a temporal discipline which God gives to His children for their good (**Heb.12:3-11**)? Or should we see this as God's eternal wrath poured out on an unbelieving generation? The book of Hebrews addresses this issue by using that generation of Israelites as an example to spur on believers who seem to be turning away from Christ due to hard times (**Heb.3:7-14**)

*… Today, if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts as you did **in the rebellion**, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did. That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways. So I declared on oath in my anger, **they shall never enter my rest**.*

William Lane in his **commentary on Hebrews** writes concerning this passage:

*The concern of the author of Hebrews is that the community should maintain its integrity and continue to live in terms of the divine promises. The memory of Israel's failure in this regard, as set forth in **Ps 95**, provides the basis for the sober warning that a refusal to listen to God's voice and to respond in obedience would entail the tragic loss of their promised inheritance. (**Heb.1-8** Word Biblical Commentary 47a, 1991, **p.83**.)*

The loss of inheritance that we see for the Israelites is the loss of the promised land. But clearly this is shown to be **a picture of or analogous to spiritual salvation resulting in eternal life**.

*In **Heb.3:7-19** the quotation from **Ps.95:7-11** furnishes the basis for the exhortation to remain sensitive to the promise of eschatological salvation. His interpretation of the text was heavily influenced by **Num.14**. According to **Num.13-14**, Israel was camped at Kadesh in the Desert of Paran, on the*

verge of entering Canaan. Entrance into the land was the goal of the Exodus and was necessary for the fulfillment of the promise. When those who had been sent into to explore the land brought back a bad report, however, the Israelites refused to enter. ***They rejected the promise through unbelief****. (****p.84****)*

What is illustrated for us in the OT is **a people unwilling to believe** God's promise concerning a physical inheritance and therefore a **refusal to obey** resulting in a loss of the inheritance. This is then interpreted by the Holy Spirit through the author of the book to point to the reality of people **refusing to trust in the work of Jesus Christ alone** to save them resulting in loss of a spiritual inheritance and receiving spiritual condemnation. This becomes alarmingly clear in **Heb.3:15-19**:

As has just been said: Today if you hear his voice do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion. ***Who were they who heard and rebelled****? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with* ***those who sinned****, whose bodies fell in the desert? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to* ***those who disobeyed****? So we see that they were not able to enter,* ***because of their unbelief****.*

The message of these verses can be paraphrased as follows: **The Israelites of the wilderness generation turned from God and experienced his judgment. They were a disobedient people who lost their inheritance because they were UNBELIEVERS**. Don't be like them. The wilderness generation, who had the blood of Abraham coursing through their veins, was a generation of unbelievers, [**Gen.18:12-19**]. They heard the good news and they did not believe and therefore received God's eternal judgment. This judgment is illustrated to us by their physical death before entering the Promised Land. But this is only the first step in our journey in understanding the biblical identity of the nation of Israel. Perhaps Israel learned her lessons and turned to God in true repentance and faith leading to a bright and godly future. It is to this possibility that we will now turn our attention.

Crossing The Jordan

Moses addressed this next generation as he was about to die and just before they cross over the into the land of Canaan and he prophesied in **Dt.31:24-29**.

Moses ... gave this command ... place this book of the Law beside the ark of the covenant of the Lord your God. There it will remain as a witness against you. For ***I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are****. If you have been rebellious against the Lord while I am still alive and with you, how much more will you rebel after I die! Assemble before me all the elders of your tribes and all your officials, so that I can speak these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to testify against them. For* ***I know that after my death you are sure to become utterly corrupt*** *and to turn from the way I have commanded you. In days to come, disaster will fall upon you because you will do evil in the sight of the Lord and provoke him to anger by what your hands have made [****Dt.4:25-28****].*

... Was Moses correct? Were the people of Israel to continue in rebellion after the death of Moses? Or were these bitter words from a dying prophet? The first step to answering these questions is to look at the very next stage in redemptive history, the entrance into and possession of the Promised Land

found in the books of Joshua and Judges.

*When Jesus had entered Capernaum, a Roman centurion came to him, asking for help. Lord, he said, my servant lies at home paralyzed, suffering terribly. Jesus said to him, Shall I come and heal him? The centurion replied, Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But **just say the word**, and my servant will be healed ... When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith. I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. **But the subjects of the kingdom will be thrown outside**, into the darkness where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (**Mt.8:5-12**).*

The sons of the kingdom are the nation of Israel and to be cast out into the outer darkness is eternal punishment in hell (**Mt.22:13**) given to all unbelievers who rebel against God. **D.A. Carson** writes concerning this passage, *So **the subjects of the kingdom are the Jews**, who see themselves as sons of Abraham, belonging to the kingdom by right. But Jesus reverses roles (**cf.21:43**); and **the sons of the kingdom are thrown aside**, left out of the future messianic banquet, consigned to darkness where there are tears and gnashing of teeth - elements common to descriptions of gehenna, hell. (D.A. Carson, Matthew, in Expositor's Bible Commentary 8, 1984, **p.202-203**.)* Matthew is plain that **the majority of Israelites are going to face God's eternal judgment because they have rejected Him**. In this passage Matthew clearly states that the Israelites will be replaced in the kingdom of heaven by a people who actually love God.

The Children of Abraham in Galatians

In the book of Galatians **the children of Abraham are redefined** as all those who place their trust in Jesus Christ, that is Spiritual Israel, rather than those who are simply related to Abraham by blood [natural Israel]. Galatians is written to professed believers in who were in danger of going back under the Mosaic law by **redefining the Gospel** to include both trust in Jesus and obedience to the Mosaic Law in order to be saved. So Paul began to explain to them that they completely misunderstood the purpose of the Mosaic Covenant and the Mosaic Law. In **chapter three and four** he explains in some detail the purpose of the Mosaic Covenant, the Abrahamic Covenant, and their relationship to one another:

*Consider Abraham: He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Understand, then, that **those who believe are** [spiritually] **children of Abraham**. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the Gospel in advance to Abraham: All nations will be blessed through you. So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham the man of faith (**Gal.3:6-9**).*

The contrast in this passage is between law and faith. Abraham's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness [as if it were obedience]. This is biblical shorthand to say that Abraham gained acceptance from God not by anything that he did, that is not by obedience to the law, but by taking God at His word. Now, we have the first mention of **sons of Abraham** in **Gal.3:7**. But this definition of who the sons of Abraham are should cause us to wonder. The impression we get from **Gen.17** is that the children of Abraham are those who are physically descended from Abraham, the Jews:

Abram fell facedown, and God said to him, As for me, this is my covenant with you: No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a [spiritual] father of [people from] many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will make nations of you and kings will come from you. ***I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your*** *[spiritual]* ***descendants*** *... for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants ... The whole land of Canaan, where you are now an alien, I will give as an everlasting possession to you and your descendants … and I will be their God (**Gen.17:3-8**).* There is nothing in the context of Genesis to lead us to understand the descendants or seeds of Abraham to be anything other than those who are physically related to him. But now in Galatians we find that the children of Abraham are all [spiritual] those who are of faith. Make no mistake about it, this is God's inspired interpretation of **who the children of Abraham really are**. Later in Galatians Paul refers to **Gen.12:7** and the Abrahamic promise: *The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say, and to* ***seeds****, meaning many people, but and to your* ***seed****, meaning one person, Christ (**Gal.3:16**).*

Now this should strike us as a very strange statement given that **in Gen.15:4-5** God tells Abraham that **the promise of a seed is plural**: *Then the word of the Lord came to him: This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir ... Look up at the heavens and count the stars ... so shall your offspring be.* Again **we have a clear redefining of terms by God through Paul in the book of Galatians**. Paul is interpreting the physical picture given in the OT and showing us the Spiritual reality to which it pointed. The Abrahamic Covenant is the revealing of God's plan to save a people. **Isaac** as the [supernatural] seed of Abraham **is the key to the promise given to Abraham**. But of course that promise extends to all of the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac.

Therefore, through Isaac the children of Abraham are as many as the stars in the sky. In the same way, **God uses one seed, that is Jesus Christ, to save a Spiritual people and make them His own**. That Jesus Christ is the one seed that God brings into the world to save a people, and those who are united to him by faith become seeds or children of Abraham is explicitly stated in **Gal.3:29**: ***If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to promise.*** So **the children of Abraham are redefined as being all those who trust in Christ**, rather than all those who are physically descended from Abraham [see Abraham's Four Seeds by John Reisinger].

Conclusion

Scripture clearly identifies the Israelites as an unbelieving people. There always has been a small remnant of believing Israelites, but they exist as the exception rather than the rule. [The Israelites were primarily unbelieving sinners rather than sinful believers.]

Is There A Future for Israel in Romans 11?

by *Steve Lehrer* http://idsaudio.org/ids/pdf/scripture/romans11.pdf

In ***Israel: an Unbelieving People***, I argued that God's evaluation of Israel has remained consistent throughout biblical history: **Israel has always been a nation of unbelievers**. This evaluation reaches a fever pitch in the Gospels and the book of Acts—so much so, that it seems as if God has

turned His back on all Israelites forever, and is now only in the business of saving Gentiles.[1] This is foundational to my understanding of **Rom.11**. Paul is attempting to remind those Gentiles in the church that God will **still** save those Jews who repent and believe. The Gentiles in Rome were becoming arrogant. They were beginning to think that they were the new chosen people, and that God was utterly finished with the Jews. The thrust of Paul's argument in **Rom.11** is that God still saves Jews and will continue to do so throughout the New Covenant era.

1. I argue this point in the final section of my article, Israel: A Nation of Unbelievers.

The Argument of Romans 9-10

Paul's message in **Rom.9-10** is extremely important for our understanding of **Rom.11**. In these chapters Paul drives home **3 main points**:
(1) God has always saved only a remnant of Israel;
(2) God has the right to show mercy, or harden whoever He desires;
(3) Israel has rebelled against God throughout her history.

In **Rom.9**, after Paul recalls all of the amazing privileges God has given to Israel over the centuries, he causes us to readjust our thinking. Because of all of their privileges and promises, one wonders why they seemed to have so totally rejected this great salvation Paul describes in **Rom.8**. One might think God has gone back on His promises—or, that He has been unable to overcome Israel's rebelliousness. But Paul tells us that **we must forsake the idea that all of Israel was God's true people**. Instead, **only a portion of Israel** has ever been believers: *It is not as though God's word had failed. For **not all** who are descended from Israel are Israel (**Rom.9:6**).* Paul is concerned with showing that God's promises to Israel have not failed, and he goes to great lengths to make sure that these promises are correctly understood. **The physical nation of Israel was never promised eternal salvation**. Paul argues that this has always been a revealed truth by showing God's sovereignty in election among the children of Abraham and Isaac: ***Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children**. On the contrary, It is through Isaac [the child of promise] that your offspring will be reckoned [**Gen.21:12**]. In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the [supernatural] children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring. For this was how the promise was stated: At the appointed time I will return, and Sarah will have a son. Not only that, but Rebekah's children had one and the same father, our father Isaac, **Gen.25:21**. Yet, before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad [**v.16**] —in order **that God's purpose in election might stand**: not by works but by him who calls—she was told, the older will serve the younger. Just as it is written: Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated [**Mal. 1:2-3**] (**Rom.9:7-13**).*

Unlike Isaac and Ishmael—who were children of different mothers—Jacob and Esau not only had the same mother, but also were created in the same act of conception! But **God chose to set His saving love on Jacob and not Esau**. God's promise of salvation to the descendants of Abraham did not fail. However Esau, who was clearly a child of Abraham, was not saved [see **Children of Abraham; GT – appendicies, APDX 5, p.8-12**]. This leaves a bit of a theological problem for us. Paul's answer to this problem is twofold: **First**, since **God is the creator**. [he has complete discre-

tion] he can have mercy on whomever He wants and harden whomever He wants (**v.14-21**). **Second**, **God has always promised only to save a** [believing] **remnant of the descendants of Abraham** according to the flesh, and He will continue to do so: ***Isaiah*** *cries out concerning Israel [**Isa.9:22-23**]: Though the number of the Israelites be like the sand by the sea, **only the remnant will be saved**. For the Lord will carry out his sentence on earth with speed and finality. It is just as Isaiah said previously: Unless the Lord Almighty had left us descendants [as he has] , we would have become [extinct] like Sodom … like Gomorrah (**Rom.9:27-29**).*

At the end of **Rom.9** and continuing through **Rom.10**, the idea is introduced that God has given faith to the Gentiles, while the Jews who had everything were unable to find God: *What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but **as if it were** by works. They stumbled over the 'stumbling stone' [a metaphorical reference to Christ, **1 Pt.2:8**] (**Rom.9:30-32**).* Quoting the prophet **Isaiah**, Paul makes the argument that **the Gentiles responded to the God's offer of salvation while the Israelites rebelled**: *And **Isaiah** [**65:1-2**] boldly says, I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me. But concerning Israel he says, All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people (**Rom.10:20-21**).* Thus, **Paul has established the truths that**, **(1)** God has always saved only a remnant of Israel, **(2)** God has the right to show mercy, or to harden, whoever He desires, **(3)** Israel has rebelled against God throughout her history.

Romans 11, *When* is Paul writing about?

The majority of commentators (Jonathan Edwards; Charles Hodge; Herman Ridderbos; George E. Ladd; Geerhardus Vos; John Piper; Wayne Grudem; John Murray; etc.) **hold that Paul is carefully building an argument about the salvation of national Israel**—reaching its climax in **Rom. 11:25-26**—concluding that in the *distant future* all or most of national Israel will be saved. But the passage seems to refer exclusively to the present time in Paul's day. I don't believe that **Rom.11** is prophecy about end-time events. There is overwhelming evidence in the passage, Paul is concerned with the *present time* rather than the future: In **v.1**, Paul's answer to the question about whether God had rejected his people deals with Paul's first century salvation, not something in the distant future. In **v.5**, Paul answers the question about God's rejection of Israel with a reference to his contemporary situation: *So too, at the present time there is a remnant chosen by grace.* In **v.13-14** Paul refers to his hope that his own evangelistic work with the Gentiles in the first century will arouse Israelites in that general time period to envy the Gentiles for having God's salvation: *I am talking to you Gentiles ... I make much of my ministry in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people [Jews] to envy [you Gentiles] and save some of them [by turning them to faith in Christ].*

Paul sees a pattern in the amazing wisdom of God, revealing a mystery of His plan: God-ordained that the fall of Israel has led, and is leading to, the salvation of the Gentiles. This is causing Jews to become jealous, which is leading to the salvation of some (Fall-Salvation-Jealousy-Salvation). In **v.30-31** Paul tells us that the salvation of the Gentiles—which leads to the jealousy of the Jews, leads to the salvation of some Jews—was all taking place now in Paul's day: *Just as you [Gentiles] were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy as a result of the disobedience [of the*

Jews], so they too [Gentiles] have now become disobedient in order that those Jews too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you.

Did God Reject His People? No! Remember the Remnant

Paul never changes the main focus of his inquiry throughout **Rom.9-11**. The Apostle is relentless in his analysis of this important question: Has God *utterly* rejected Israel? The constant answer is, *No. **God has always saved a remnant of Israel**, and He will continue to do so.* In **v.11:1**, Paul asks the question that remains the central focus of the entire chapter: *I ask then: **Did God reject his people?*** Now there are two possibilities concerning the meaning of Paul's question. **First**, he could be asking, Did God reject Israel as a nation of people and their future salvation? **Second**, he could be asking, Did God *utterly* reject Israel so that no more Israelites will ever be saved? Paul makes it clear that the meaning of his question is certainly the latter, because his answer in **verse 1** is that God is presently, in Paul's day, saving a remnant: *By no means **(God has not rejected His people)!** I am an Israelite myself, a descendant of Abraham, from the tribe of Benjamin.* The evidence—that Paul is a Jew and that he has been saved—tells us that God has not utterly rejected Israel. **Our investigation so far has led us in the opposite direction of the most popular interpretation**. Paul begins his argument not arguing for the salvation of the majority of ethnic Israel in the distant future, but rather the salvation of a tiny remnant of ethnic Israel in Paul's day. This line of argument continues through **v.5:**

*What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, but the **elect** did. The others were hardened. God did not reject his people, whom he foreknew. Don't you know what the Scripture says in the passage about **Elijah** [**1 Ki.19:10,14,18**]—how **he appealed to God against Israel**: Lord, they have killed your prophets and torn down your altars; I am the only one left, and they are trying to kill me? And what was God's answer to him? I have reserved for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal. So too, at the present time there is a remnant **chosen by grace** (**Rom.11:2-5**).* Paul asks the same question and gives the same answer all over again in **v.7**: *What then? What Israel sought so earnestly it did not obtain, **but the elect did**. The others were hardened.* At first, given Israel's rejection of the Gospel, **you might think that none of Israel obtained salvation**, but Paul assures us here in **verse 7** that there were elect within Israel and they were saved just as he assured us earlier in **verses 1 & 4-5**.

Dealing with Difficult Language in Rom.11

Most commentators think that Paul changes tracks in his argument at **v.11**. Douglas Moo neatly divides the passage into two sections: Israel's rejection is neither total (**11:1-10**) nor final (**11:11-32**).[2] According to Moo, **verses 1-10** deal with the remnant as I have also argued, but thinks that **verses 11-32** address the future of national Israel. Yet **v.11** gives no evidence of any change in Paul's argument: *Again I ask: **Did they stumble so as to fall beyond recovery?** Not at all! Rather, because of their transgression, salvation has come to the Gentiles to make Israel envious.* I have already made the argument that **the envy of Israel was happening at the time of Paul's writing**. The question in **v.11** remains the same as it has from **v.1**. That much is clear. The **difficulty with my view** begins in the next verse (**v.12**) which uses language, which upon first reading seems to intro-

duce an eschatological and total future salvation of Israel: *But if their transgression means riches for the world, and their loss means riches for the Gentiles, how much greater riches will their fullness bring!* This language continues in **v.15**: *For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?*

2. *Moo, The Epistle to the Romans, The New International Commentary on the NT, 1996,* ***p.683****.*

I have already introduced **a pattern of thought** that I believe is part of the warp and woof of Paul's thinking in this passage: *God ordained the fall of which led and is leading to the salvation of the Gentiles. This is causing Jews to become jealous, which is leading some Jews to salvation (Fall-Salvation-Jealousy-Salvation).* **The chart below notes parallels between verses with this pattern of thought**. You will notice that some of the more difficult language found in **Rom.12 and 15** can be explained by other verses that express the same thought in clearer language:

Disobedience [Jews]	**Salvation [Gentiles]**	**Envy [Jews]**	**Salvation [Jews]**
11*- Rather because of their transgression*	*salvation has come to the Gentiles*	*to make Israel envious.*	
12*- But if their transgression means*	*riches for the world,*		*how much more will their fullness bring!*
and their loss means	*riches for the Gentiles*		
13*-*	*Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I make much of my ministry*	***14****- in the hope that I may somehow arouse my own people to envy*	*and save some of them*
15*- For if their rejection*	*is reconciliation of the world*		*what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?*
25*- Israel has experienced a hardening*	*until the full number of the Gentiles has come in*		*and so all will be saved as it is written:*
30*- as a result of their disobedience*	*Just as you who were at one time disobedient to God have now received mercy*		
31*- so they too have now become disobedient*	*as a result of God's mercy to you*		*in order that they too may now receive mercy*

Some of the most difficult pieces of **Rom.11** for my particular understanding of this passage are listed under the salvation (Jews) section. But notice that parallel in thought—with fullness, their acceptance and all Israel will be saved—to save some of them and that they too may now receive mercy. The lan-

guage Paul uses at times seems to argue for the interpretation of a future full national salvation of Israel. But **the remnant and partial salvation language is equally strong and has the added bonus of being the driving force of the argument**. The idea that all of ethnic Israel will someday in the distant future be saved **is foreign to the larger context**.

Boastful Gentiles Rebuked

We must try and jump into the sandals of the Gentile Christians that Paul is addressing in the church in Rome. **They had experienced nothing but grief from the hands of the Jews**. It seemed as if the Jews were constantly persecuting them.[3] Remember that they had all read (or heard) the story about both Jesus and Paul turning from the Jews to the Gentiles with the Gospel.[4] They had begun to believe that **they** were now God's true people, and that the Jews were no longer in God's plan of salvation. Paul gives a stinging rebuke to these Gentiles for carelessly dismissing the Jews:

3. Acts 8:1-3; 9:1; 12:1-5; 17:5-9

4. You'll find this argument in the last section of the article: A Nation of Unbelievers.

*If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not boast over those branches ... consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you. You will say then, Branches were broken off **so that** I could be grafted in. Granted. But **they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith**. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid. For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God: **sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you**, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise [if you don't], you also will be cut off. And if they do not persist in unbelief, they will be grafted in ... again. [an application of the principle in **Ez.18:21-28; 33:12-20**] After all, since you were cut out of an olive tree that is wild by nature, and contrary to nature were grafted into a cultivated olive tree, how much more readily will these, the natural branches , be regrafted into their own olive tree (**Rom.11:17-24**)!*

Notice that **the thrust of Paul's argument is not as the popular interpretation would have us believe**, that there will be an overwhelming conversion of national in the distant future. Rather, the Apostle seems to say: You think Israel is entirely rejected and you Gentiles have a corner on the market of salvation. You are wrong. It is actually more natural for Jews to be saved than for Gentiles to be saved.

Until *(achris hou)* in verse 25

The word **until** in **v.25** creates great amounts of confusion. *I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.* **Many assume that this verse must mean** that the partial hardening of Israel will continue up to the point in time when the final Gentile is saved. At that point in time, the partial hardening will cease and all Israel will repent and believe. This understanding of the verse is a contextual train wreck, in that it introduces thoughts that are utterly new to the argument. This interpretation neglects an important option for our understanding of the Greek phrase underlying the word until in **v.25**. Until is a translation of the Greek phrase *achris hou*. **The**

phrase brings matters 'up to' a certain point or 'until' a certain goal is reached. It does not itself determine the state of affairs after the termination. The subsequent circumstances can be learned only from the context.[5] ***Acts 22:4*** *I persecuted the followers of this Way **to** (achris hou) their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison.* The use of our phrase here is focused on the goal of persecuting Christians to death and not the state of affairs after they are dead. ***Heb.4:12*** *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even **to** (achris hou) dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* Once again the emphasis is not on what happens beyond the division of soul and spirit, but the goal or termination point. ***1 Cor.11:26*** *For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death **until** (achris hou) he comes.* The point of until in this verse is that you proclaim the Lord's death by participating in the Lord's Supper all the way t**o the goal or termination point, which is the Lord's return**. Our phrase has no reference to the state of affairs after His return.[6]

5. O. Palmer Robertson, The Israel of God, (2000), p.179. I am indebted to Robertson for this whole line of thought.

6. Two more examples of this are found in the following verses: ***Mt.24:38*** *For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to (achris hou) the day Noah entered the ark;* ***1 Cor.15:25*** *For he must reign until (achris hou) he has put all his enemies under his feet.*

Thus, in **Rom.11:25** the use of our phrase does not refer to the state of affairs occurring after the goal or termination point: *I do not want you to be ignorant of this mystery, brothers, so that you may not be conceited: Israel has experienced a hardening in part **until** the full number of the Gentiles has come in.* What happens after the full number of Gentiles has come in, which is the termination point, is not addressed in this verse. What we do know from our examination of the passage up to this point is that Israel has experienced this partial hardening so that there has always been a tiny remnant of Israelites that God calls to himself. There will continue to be a remnant of believers in Israel and a majority of unbelievers all the way up to the time when the full number of Gentiles come in. The popular view says, Okay, I can live with that. **The very next verse tells us exactly what happens *after* the termination point when the full number of Gentiles comes in**, and that is that the entire nation of Israel will be saved. Not so fast, now that we have established that until does not emphasize what happens after the full number of Gentiles come in, let's see if **v.26** refers to that or not.

And so *(kai houtos)* all shall be saved

The Greek phrase ***kai houtos*** is often read incorrectly as "and then" … which gives it a temporal flavor. But in the 205 times that it is used in the NT, it never has an unambiguously temporal meaning. It is far better to read it as **and in this way** or **in this manner** … This fits the context perfectly. Paul is emphasizing the amazing way or manner in which God has chosen for all of the elect of to be saved. In fact, the particular manner in which God plans to save His elect within Israel is the revelation of a mystery in the all-wise plan of God.[7] The emphasis of **v.26** is the *pattern* in which God will save His people, rather than the *amount* of Israelites to be saved. The God-ordained fall of Israel led

and is leading to the salvation of the Gentiles. That is amazing, but what makes one positively marvel at God's wisdom is that the salvation of the Gentiles is causing Jews to become jealous, which is leading to their salvation!

7. Rom.11:33-36

So, the point of **Rom.11:26** is not something absolutely new to the context—that God is going to save every last ethnic Israelite who happens to be alive after the final elect Gentile has come to faith. Instead, it is better to interpret **v.26** within the framework of Paul's argument: that God has not forsaken the Jews entirely, but even from within this rebellious people God has his elect. This was shocking news to the Gentiles. They had seen and heard about Jesus' and Paul's rejection of the Jews, who were still unbelieving and were persecuting the church. As we saw, Paul adds more to his argument than just those bare facts. He gives us a glimpse at the all-wise plan of God! God not only used the fall of Israel to bring salvation to the Gentiles, but He is using the salvation of the Gentiles to stir up jealousy and bring elect Israelites to salvation. This will continue all the way up ***until*** **the full number of the Gentiles come to faith**.

What Does All Mean? There are 5 options to consider: [8]

8. Ibid., **p.183**. Robertson laid out the general framework for me but I take the blame for the additional comments.

1. All ethnic descendants of Abraham. This option is knocked out in **Rom.9:6**.

2. All ethnic descendants of Abraham living when God initiates a special working among the Jewish people. This option and option #3 are variations on the most popular interpretation that I have argued against here as missing the context. These options specifically miss the emphasis on the contemporary nature of Paul's argument, as well as the consistent and sustained emphasis on the remnant of Israel.

3. The majority of Jews living at the time of a special saving activity of God. In addition to the comments made above about this option, it has the added burden of explaining **how all means most**.

4. All elect Israelites within ethnic Israel. I believe **this is the strongest view**, given the continual differentiation between Israel and the Gentiles in **Rom.9-11**, as well as the emphasis on the elect or the remnant within Israel. This interpretation still allows 'all' to mean every last one of a particular group, which in this case is all of the elect ethnic Israelites.

5. Both **Jews and Gentiles who together constitute the church of Christ, the Israel of God**. **Lee Irons** has an excellent paper arguing for this conclusion called Paul's Theology of Israel's Future: A Non-Millennial Interpretation of **Rom.11**.[9] But it is hard for me to get around the consistent emphasis throughout **Rom.9-11** that differentiates between Gentiles and ethnic Israel. I could still buy Irons' argument if it weren't for the verses immediately after **v.26** that once again differentiate between the two groups:

9. *The Reformation and Revival Journal* (Eschatology – Vol.6, Num.2 – Spring, 1997).

*As far as the Gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are **loved** on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable. Just as you [Gentiles] who were at one time disobedient to God **have now received mercy** as a result of their [Jews]* disobedience*, so they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy as a result of God's mercy to you (**Rom.11:28-31**).*

Conclusion

Rom.11 is a difficult passage, but I don't believe it teaches that there is a promise for a national future salvation for all of ethnic Israel. The thing **Israel is guaranteed** in this passage is **that God's salvation is still available to any Jew who repents and believes**. But this interpretation is out-of-step with the way most interpreters understand it.